

ALFRED

FEBRUARY 50¢ K

HITCHCOCK'S

MYSTERY MAGAZINE



NEW stories presented by the master of SUSPENSE

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February 1968

Dear Reader:

After scanning the subscription lists and finding not one subscriber outside of this world, I conceived a daring breakthrough in giveaway contests. Of course I have no way of knowing who might purchase their copies at a newsstand. However, plans are now under way to offer an eternal subscription to the first reader sending in a coupon from the Hereafter.

Scorched coupons would be considered, if legible, for the decision of one's judges is, after all, final, and would not be held against a contestant.

Zip codes would be mandatory.

The contest would be void where prohibited by life—as we know it. If you are unqualified to enter—or is it to leave?—you may take solace in and advantage of the new bonus offer on Page 135.

New Year's Eve is already a memory—if, indeed, one is conscious of the event—but for those of you yet plagued with serpent and simian, there are sobering thoughts herein; this despite the imbibitional habits of some you will meet, notably those in this month's novelette.

Alfred Hitchcock

ALFRED HITCHCOCK'S MYSTERY MAGAZINE

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ALFRED HITCHCOCK'S

mystery magazine

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Richard E. Decker, Publisher

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Will and Intellect are believed by many to be one and the same.

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DEVC

JOHN MANNING had just hung up his hat and sat down at his desk when Harry Thor, chief of the claims section, came in. Thor was wearing a cloudy scowl on his round, humorless face.

by
Clark Howard

"You read the papers yet this morning?" he inquired without preliminary.

Manning shook his head. "Didn't have time. Overslept. Why?"

"Mexco Petroleum's company plane went down in Crater Lake yesterday afternoon, pilot and one junior executive aboard. Pilot got out before the plane went under; no sign of the junior executive."

Manning raised his eyebrows. "Mexco's got a blanket policy with us, haven't they? Covering all employees that use their company plane?"

"They have," snorted Thor. "Blanket coverage with a face value of a hundred thousand."

Manning whistled softly and turned to his desk. Opening a drawer, he took out a map of the state and unfolded it before them. When he had located Crater Lake he whistled again, louder this time.

"Nine hundred feet deep," he said ominously. "That's a long way down."

"Too far down to suit my taste," Thor almost snarled. He jerked the map closer. "Look here," he stabbed a finger at one location, "this is the point of departure. And this," he moved his finger halfway up the state, "was their destination. I called the airport and got this information before you came in. The flight plan called for

a direct route, no side trips. The line of flight from takeoff to where they were supposed to land was straight as a bullet; yet the plane managed to go down on Crater Lake, more than thirty miles off course. And—" Thor now jabbed his stubby finger almost to the top of Manning's nose, "not only did it go down on the deepest lake in the state, but it flew over two other lakes—*much shallower lakes*—to get to it. Now, how does that grab you?"

"Sounds peculiar, all right," Manning allowed, wishing Thor would keep his fat finger to himself. Manning did not like Harry Thor. As his assistant, he had been waiting a long time for Thor to retire. Eligible for a pension four years ago when he had completed thirty-five years of loyal service to the company, Thor, for some reason, kept putting it off from year to year, kept playing cat-and-mouse with Manning and the others who would move up a notch when he finally stepped down. He was still six years under the mandatory retirement age, and although he continued to ply his subordinates with veiled comments about leaving, no one, least of all John Manning, really believed him anymore.

"I want you to handle this one personally," Thor told him. "Go up to Crater Lake and snoop

around. Check the local weather station for wind velocity to see if a light plane could have been blown that far off course. If the weather was clear, dig around for something on the pilot; maybe he was drinking on the job, who knows?" Thor patted Manning benevolently on the shoulder. "Do a good job for me on this one, will you, John? This might be the last hundred thousand dollar case I'll be in charge of." He winked confidentially. "I might just call it a career after this one."

"Sure," Manning said without enthusiasm, "sure you might."

Thor left the office and Manning, tight-lipped, folded up the map.

Early that afternoon, John Manning stood on the eastern shore of Crater Lake. With him was the county sheriff, who was directing diving operations for the plane and the missing passenger. Out on the center of the lake, a patrol launch and several smaller craft bobbed at anchor in an uneven semicircle.

"How many divers do you have working?" Manning wanted to know.

"Just two, officially," the sheriff said. "That's all the budget allows for. But we've got three volunteers that aren't on the payroll, so that gives us five. The volunteers are using their own scuba gear; my two men have the regular div-

ing suits provided by the county."

"Think there's a chance they'll find anything?"

"Naw," the sheriff scoffed knowingly. "We go through all of this rigamarole strictly for the sake of the public and the newspaper reporters. I been sheriff of this county for seven years now, and was a deputy for fourteen. I've seen maybe a dozen or so of these diving operations. Never turned up a thing on any of them. There's a nine hundred foot hole under the surface of that water, friend. Once something goes down, it's down for good."

Manning nodded and lighted a cigarette. "Where's the nearest weather station?"

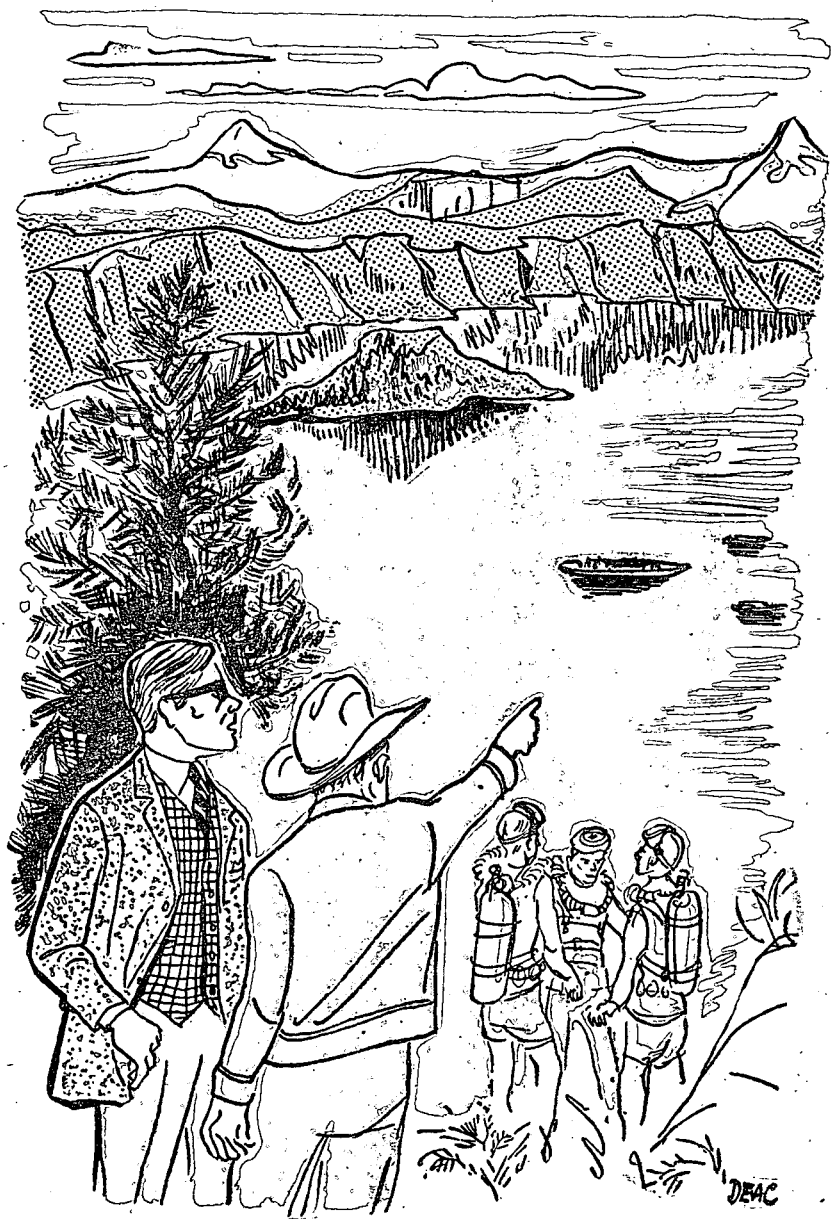
The sheriff pointed across the lake to the highest elevation of land that could be seen. "Ranger headquarters up at Butte Point. Want to go up?"

"Yeah. I'd like to find out if there was much high altitude wind yesterday."

"Come on," the sheriff said, "I'll run you up. Not much use in standing around here all day."

The sheriff led him back to the road where his car was parked, and radioed the patrol launch to tell them where he was going.

"How's the pilot doing?" Manning asked casually when they were cruising around to the other



side of the lake. "In shock, maybe?"

"Doing fine when I checked in on him at the hospital this morning. Wasn't hurt hardly at all except for a few scratches and a couple of bruises. Mostly what got him was exhaustion and exposure. Gets pretty cold up here at night, and he was soaking wet. Took him the better part of two hours to get to shore. Lucky for him he was a good swimmer."

"Yeah," Manning said, "lucky."

They reached the west side of the lake and the sheriff guided the car onto a narrow service road that wound up and around Butte mountain.

"Kind of odd no one saw the plane go down, wasn't it?" Manning asked.

"Not for Crater Lake," the sheriff replied. "Any other lake, yeah, it would have been odd as a foot with six toes; but not old Crater."

"Why's that?"

"It's a spook lake, that's why. Got a jinx on it. People stay away from it, even tourists. Got half a dozen bodies in it right now; swimmers, fishermen, boaters. Those are bodies we *know* about. There's maybe ten or twelve more we ain't sure about; hunters and campers and such that disappeared close by. Ten years ago, fifteen, it was a real popular place, but nowadays folks mostly use the shallower

lakes. Got plenty of them around, lakes two and three hundred feet deep that don't have any drag-water under the surface to pull you down. Lots safer."

"Wonder why the pilot didn't try to set down on one of them?" Manning queried.

"That's something you'll have to ask him," the sheriff answered disinterestedly. He brought the car to a halt on a graded parking area in front of the ranger station. "Well, here we are."

They went inside and the sheriff introduced Manning to the ranger in charge. Manning explained what he was interested in and the ranger brought out the station weather log for the previous day.

"I'm afraid you won't find anything too exciting," he said. "Yesterday was pretty mild at all altitudes."

He showed the book to Manning and ran his finger down the chart, explaining the markings.

"Here at the station we had very light winds all day; highest recorded velocity was six miles per hour. Two thousand feet above us, which would be sixty-eight hundred feet above sea level, there were winds from the south at twelve to fifteen miles per hour."

"The plane was on a flight plan of eleven thousand feet," Manning said. "What was the wind at that

level? Much stronger currents?"

"Well, let's see—at ten thousand we recorded a sixteen mile draft; and at fifteen thousand we got twenty-one. At eleven thousand feet the velocity would have been seventeen to eighteen miles per hour."

"That," Manning sighed, "takes care of the wind angle. An eighteen-mile-an-hour draft couldn't blow a Piper Cub off course, much less a four-passenger Beechcraft. Incidentally, how was the visibility yesterday?"

The ranger looked at the log-book again. "A few variable clouds around twenty thousand feet, but everything below that was unlimited."

"Perfect conditions all the way around," the sheriff observed quietly. "Couldn't have been neater if the flight plan had called for him to set down on old Crater."

Manning smiled weakly. "No, it couldn't have."

The sheriff dropped Manning at a motel in Crater City. After checking into a room, the insurance investigator put through a call to Harry Thor.

"I've been out with the sheriff all day," he said when he had Thor on the line. "There's not much chance that they're going to be able to recover the plane or the passenger. Looks like we'll have to lay

out that hundred thousand without even seeing a corpse."

"It's not a hundred thousand anymore," Thor growled into the phone. "It's a hundred and fifty now. The passenger was one of Mexico's junior engineers, fellow named Herbert Stanley. Seems he had a personal policy with us. Twenty-five thousand face value with double indemnity for accidental death."

"So," Manning said, "the plot thickens."

"So does the smell," Thor added. "What did you find out about the weather?"

"Couldn't have been better. Not enough wind to disturb a kite and so clear you could see Japan."

"Nice," grunted Thor. "Very pat."

"Very," Manning agreed. He felt good knowing that old Harry was stewing in his own sweat. If there was one thing Thor hated, it was paying out big claims without even enjoying the insurance company's built-in privilege of having an autopsy performed on the victim. Not that Harry was ghoulish; he simply felt that the company should get its money's worth on big claims.

"What about the pilot?" Thor wanted to know.

"He came out of it in pretty good shape. He's in the Crater City

hospital, mostly for observation. I haven't gone to see him yet; I thought maybe you might like to be in on it."

"Don't you think you can handle it?" Thor snorted.

"I can handle it," Manning replied testily, "but since this might be the last big one of your career—that's what you said this morning, remember?—I thought maybe you'd like to be in on it personally."

Thor's nasty chuckle came over the line, the sound of it rubbing like sandpaper along Manning's spine.

"All right," he agreed happily. "I'll come up early in the morning and take care of the difficult part of the job for you. Goodnight, John." Thor hung up before Manning could answer him.

Manning sat on the motel room bed, staring at the dead receiver in his hand. For a moment cold anger began to build up inside him, but he took a deep breath, forced his body to relax. With a steady hand he replaced the instrument in its cradle and lay back on the bed. Looking up at the colorless ceiling above him, he even managed to smile.

At noon the next day, Manning accompanied Harry Thor to the Crater City hospital. They found the Mexco company pilot, Russ

Webb, sitting up in bed, eating heartily from a lunch tray. An attractive young woman in a bright summer dress sat next to the bed. Thor introduced himself and Manning, and explained the purpose of their visit.

"Just a few brief questions," Thor said in his most syrupy voice. "It's routine in large claim cases."

"Be glad to help you in any way I can," Webb said. "You'll excuse me if I continue with my lunch. This is the first solid meal they've given me and I'm starved."

"I understand." Thor smiled a practiced smile. "You look to be in surprisingly good condition for a man who was in a plane crash less than forty-eight hours ago."

"Well, it wasn't really a crash," Webb said. "It was more like a forced landing. I kind of belly-flopped on the lake, like a seaplane would. Except, of course, I had no pontoons to stabilize the initial impact; I had to keep the landing gear up and rely on the underside of the cabin for ballast."

"What made you go down?" Thor asked casually.

"Engine trouble. Felt like a clogged fuel line, or maybe a faulty fuel pump; no way I can be sure, you understand; I'm just telling you what it felt like. Anyway, the engine started missing badly and we were losing altitude. I tried all

the standard emergency practices to try to synchronize the engine, but nothing worked. We were still losing altitude, so I started looking for a place to set down."

"How was it that you chose Crater Lake?" Thor inquired, still smiling. "As I understand it, between your flight pattern and Crater Lake there were two other lakes—much shallower lakes, as a matter of fact—that you could have set down on."

"Yes, I saw both of them," Russ Webb admitted. "Over the first one, however, I still had too much altitude to try banking for a landing; I was afraid the engine might choke out completely while I was in a turn; thing like that can throw you into a tailspin and you go down nose-first."

Webb put the tray aside, and the pretty young woman sitting beside the bed handed him a cigarette and lighted it for him. Then he went on with the story.

"I almost went down on the second lake," he said, "but when I got low enough to see the water it looked pretty choppy in places. I guess I got a little nervous and let it scare me away. Now—that I think back, since it was late in the afternoon, I suppose what I really saw were just moving shadows on the rippling surface of the water. But like I said, I was pretty nervous; it

wasn't like Switzerland where the lakes are smooth as glass."

"So you went on to Crater Lake, eh?" Thor said pleasantly. "And there, I suppose, you found what you considered ideal conditions for a forced landing, am I correct? Not too much altitude, no shadows on the water?"

"Exactly," Russ Webb said blandly. "That's exactly right."

"What happened after you hit the water?"

"I came in real low, skimmed the water until I judged us to be about in the middle of the lake. Then I cut the engine and eased the plane's belly down to the surface of the water. We hit fairly easy, but then one of the wings tipped into the water and spun us halfway around. When that happened, the nose went under and the tail went up and we stopped."

"What did you do then?"

"Well, I was kind of shaken up for a couple of minutes, but when I came out of it I unbuckled my seatbelt and turned around and yelled for Herb—Herb Stanley, the guy I was flying up north for the company. I asked him if he was okay, and he yelled back from the cabin that he was. So I yelled let's get out of here, and he said he was on his way. See, we had decided beforehand that after we hit, I'd go out the cockpit hatch and he'd go

out the cabin door to save time."

"Were both exits above water?"

Thor asked.

Webb nodded. "Herb's door was up in the air about eight feet because the tail was sticking up. My hatch was just about at water level. Matter of fact, when I opened it up the water flooded in up to my waist and I kind of half swam out of the cockpit."

"What did you do after you got out of the plane?"

"Started swimming," Webb shrugged, "what else? I wanted to get far enough away so I wouldn't be pulled under in case the plane went down."

Harry Thor changed his syrupy smile to a sad one. "Forgive me for being indelicate," he said, "but didn't you try to help your passenger at all?"

"How could I help him?" Webb said with elaborate innocence. "His door was eight feet above the water on the opposite side of the plane. Besides, I thought he was already out; the last thing he said to me was that he was on his way."

"I see," said Thor. He drummed his stubby little fingers silently against his knee. "How far away were you when the plane went under?"

"About a hundred yards or so, I guess."

"Did you see any sign of Mr.

Stanley after you abandoned the plane?"

Webb shook his head. "I could barely see the plane. This was about twilight, remember; it was getting dark very fast."

"All right," Thor said quickly, unable to conceal from his tone a growing impatience at the very foolproof story Russ Webb was relating. "What happened to you after that?"

"Well, by that time I couldn't see the shore, of course, but I tried to swim in as straight a line as possible, thinking that I'd have to hit land sooner or later. I must have gone around in circles here and there though, because it took me nearly two hours to get out of the water—"

"How do you know how long it took?" Thor asked sharply.

"Wristwatch," the pilot said, holding up his arm. "Luminous dial in a waterproof case."

"All right, go on," Thor conceded.

"I think I passed out when I finally got to shore. Must have, because the next thing I knew I woke up shivering and wet. I started walking to try to warm up a little. I walked inland, using the stars to keep on a straight course. Finally, about nine that night, I came across a hunting lodge and told the people there what had happened. They

telephoned for an ambulance and put out the alarm about the plane. That's about it."

Manning glanced at Harry Thor, knowing that the little man was seething inside at being presented with an apparently infallible story. Thor, he knew from past experience, would now put aside his pleasant manner and polite voice in favor of a more direct approach. He would now begin working on Russ Webb himself, rather than Russ Webb's unimpeachable story.

"Just one or two more questions, Mr. Webb," Thor said crisply. "For the record, you understand. How much had you had to drink prior to taking off day before yesterday?"

"Drink?" Webb said innocently. "Me? Why, nothing at all, Mr. Thor. I could lose my job for drinking before a flight, not to mention my pilot's license."

"I suppose you never drink before you fly, is that what you're saying?" Thor prodded. Then he added mysteriously, "All right, if that's your answer, I'll put it into my report that way. Now let me ask you, isn't it a fact that you and your passenger, Herbert Stanley, were not on good terms? Isn't it true that there were bad feelings between you?"

"Why, no, of course it isn't true," Webb answered with the same tone of innocence. "Whatever gave you

an idea like that? No truth to it."

"Can you prove it isn't true?" Thor challenged, using the old tried-and-true tactic of shifting the burden of proof to the suspect.

"As a matter of fact, yes, I think I can," Webb quickly retorted. He turned to the young woman at his bedside. "You tell them, Joan; tell them what kind of terms Herb and I were on."

"They were on the best of terms," the young woman said simply. "The very best of terms."

"And just who might you be, may I ask?" Thor said stiffly to the woman.

"I'll tell you who she is," Russ Webb cut in, "just in case you're thinking of trying to discredit what she tells you. She's Mrs. Joan Stanley. She's the widow of Herbert Stanley."

Thor's mouth fell open and he gaped at Joan Stanley as if she had just been identified as Cleopatra. His beady little eyes darted quickly back to Russ Webb, then returned to the woman. He looked her up and down, noting the bright summer dress she wore, obviously thinking it hardly the appropriate attire for a mourning young widow. His mind clicked backward to a few minutes earlier when she had handed Webb a cigarette and lighted it for him; not an unusual thing to do for a hospital patient,

to be sure, and yet there had been something patently intimate about it. He looked at Webb again and saw that the pilot's eyes had narrowed slightly and that he was looking at both him and Manning with an expression of cold confidence.

"So," Thor said flatly, nodding his head in slow understanding. "I think I get the picture now."

"Maybe you do, Mr. Thor," Russ Webb told him in a toneless voice, "but getting the picture and proving it are two different things."

"You'll never collect on those two policies, Mrs. Stanley," Thor vowed. "I'll see to that if it's the last thing I ever do."

"I think I will, Mr. Thor." Joan Stanley smiled, opened her purse and took out a folded document that was immediately recognizable to both Thor and Manning. "I think I'll collect on all *three* policies," she said coolly. "This one is for a hundred and fifty thousand. I received it in the mail yesterday. It's a flight insurance policy from one of your vending machines at the airport. Apparently poor Herbert bought it on impulse just before he and Russ took off." She turned to smile rather sadly at Webb. "I guess he must have had a premonition."

Harry Thor's mouth clamped into a thin line and his eyes bulged

as he stared at this latest document of insurance and realized that the ante on Herbert Stanley had just been raised to three hundred thousand dollars.

Three hundred thousand! The thought was too much for Harry. The color drained from his face and he turned and stalked from the room.

Manning followed quietly behind him, outwardly solemn, inwardly gleeful.

The next morning, Harry Thor sat behind his desk facing John Manning. On the desktop separating them were three sheafs of paper.

"These are master copies of the three policies the Stanley woman holds on the life of her husband," Thor said gruffly. "Each one of them contains a Disappearance Clause which reads as follows: 'If, while this policy is in force, the Insured disappears because of an accident which results in the disappearance, sinking or damaging of an air or water conveyance on which the Insured is covered by this policy and in which the Insured was riding, and if the body of the Insured has not been found within thirteen weeks after the date of such accident, it will be presumed, there being no evidence to the contrary, that the Insured suffered loss of life as a result of injuries covered by this policy.'"

Thor stopped reading and leveled his eyes at Manning. "What does that clause mean to you in this instance?" he asked, somewhat like a schoolmaster questioning his pupil.

"It means we don't have to pay the face value for three months," Manning answered patiently. He had been through this routine before with Thor.

"Exactly," the little man confirmed. "It means we have a grace period, during which we are going to find an out."

"An out?"

"A legitimate reason for denying payment of the claims." Thor sat back and folded his stubby fingers across his stomach. "Want me to tell you why?"

"I think I already know," said Manning. "You think they murdered Herbert Stanley, don't you? Webb and the woman?"

"Exactly," Thor said again. "I think they planned the whole thing. I think they *picked* Crater Lake. I think Herbert Stanley was either tied up or knocked out when that plane went under; I don't think he ever had a chance of getting out. And I'll tell you something else," he said, leaning forward and poking his finger across the desk, "I think Russ Webb had something to do with the buying of that vending machine policy at

the airport, too. I'd bet on that."

"That's a logical assumption," Manning admitted, "if your murder theory is correct."

"Oh, it's correct, all right," Thor declared. "Those two iced Herbert Stanley, and you and I are going to prove it." The little man's face twisted into a dark scowl. "We're going to find a way to invalidate those three claims, one by one."

Manning sighed and drew a notepad in front of him. "Okay," he said resignedly, "where do we start?"

"With Mexco's blanket flight coverage. It contains an Incompetence Clause on anyone who pilots the Mexco company plane. The pilot must hold a valid commercial flying license, must be in good physical condition, have twenty-twenty vision either corrected or uncorrected, and must not have consumed any alcoholic beverage during a period of six hours immediately prior to takeoff. I want every single point of those requirements gone over with infinite care."

Manning, making notes on his pad, nodded.

"On Herbert Stanley's personal insurance," Thor went on, "we're going to concentrate on his wife. I want her personal habits checked, her friends, neighbors, acquaintances; look into her spending pattern, find out how much she

drinks, everything. Look especially for anything that might link her to Webb. Any kind of provable conspiracy will go a long way with our legal people. If necessary, put her under surveillance around the clock."

"All right," Manning said quietly.

"Now, on that vending machine policy, I want to look into the possibility of forgery; it's possible that Webb purchased the policy and simply gave it to Stanley's wife for her to forge his signature. If we can prove *that*, we won't have to pay a dime on any of the policies. Incidentally, I've already had that particular vending machine picked up so we can check it for fingerprints. Not much chance we'll find any, I know, but you never can tell; one verifiable print of Webb's would be pretty strong evidence."

Thor sat back again and drummed his short little fingers on the desktop. "Now bear in mind that we can't use the whole three months just for our investigation. We'll need at least three weeks to prepare our report and present it to the legal department. But that still should be enough time, especially for a couple of pros like us."

Thor rose from his chair, smiling, and laid a fatherly hand on Manning's shoulder. "Let's really clean this one up, John," he said.

"Let's really give the big boys upstairs something to talk about. Then, when it's all over, I think I might be inclined to step aside and let you take the department. I think I really might be ready to do that."

"Sure," Manning said, getting up and putting the notes in his pocket. "Sure you might, Harry."

After two months, Harry Thor was more than ever convinced that Joan Stanley and Russ Webb had murdered Herbert Stanley.

Many of the points of his and Manning's investigation had, of course, failed to produce sufficient evidence to invalidate any of the three claims. They had found, for instance, that Russ Webb did indeed have a current pilot's license, that he was in superb physical condition, and that his eyesight was perfect. Furthermore, they had been unable to prove that he'd had even a glass of beer for a full week prior to the flight, much less six hours. As to the possibility that he, and not Herbert Stanley, had purchased the vending machine policy, they found nothing. No fingerprint showed on the machine itself, and if the signature on the policy were a forgery, it was an undetectable one.

Other interesting facts were uncovered, however, which offset those early disappointments. For one thing, Herbert Stanley had been described to the investigators

as rather a mild sort of individual, slight, nearsighted, meek of character, who to most people had seemed grossly mismatched with his comely, vivacious wife. Joan Stanley, it was rumored, had been far too much woman for him; her dissatisfaction with Herbert as a husband had been a major topic of gossip around the Mexco home office for some time prior to the Crater Lake crash.

Russ Webb, on the other hand, clearly was more Joan Stanley's type. Handsome, virile, adventurous, he was easily Mexco's most eligible bachelor. It did not take much imagination to visualize the two of them together—especially, as Thor poetically put it, when they could fan the spark of their mutual attraction into a three hundred thousand dollar bonfire.

To support their suspicion of a clandestine affair between the two suspects, Thor and Manning developed evidence that Joan Stanley had been in the habit of going out two evenings a week, usually on Mondays and Thursdays when Herbert worked late. Her nocturnal absences normally had lasted from seven until about ten o'clock. Collaterally, they found that Russ Webb habitually entertained in his apartment an unidentified woman during those same hours on the same nights.

Another little tidbit of knowledge, one that made Thor almost ecstatic, was that Webb possessed a silver cigarette lighter which had been observed by both investigators during the subsequent taking of a formal deposition of the accident. This item fit neatly with another piece of information they already had developed: Joan Stanley had purchased a silver cigarette lighter at a local jewelry store about three months prior to the accident, and three days prior to Russ Webb's birthday.

The single most incriminating fact, however—and by far the most damning, in Thor's estimation—was Russ Webb's swimming lessons. Masculine and athletic as he appeared, Webb as a youth had never learned to swim. He had rectified that shortcoming only very recently at a branch Y.M.C.A. For three months just prior to his forced landing on Crater Lake, Russ Webb had taken swimming lessons three nights a week, had finished the course only a week before the flight.

"That is it!" Thor cried in delight at the news. He shook his finger pneumatically only an inch from Manning's nose. "That will be the final hook, the grain of evidence that tilts the scales in our favor! Those Y.M.C.A. swimming lessons are going to save this firm

three hundred thousand dollars!" His round, flat little face glowed like a Christmas tree bulb. "I did it again, John! I busted a big one! I'll bet the big boys upstairs won't let me retire after this one!"

Manning, controlling a desire to lean over and bite the wagging little finger, said nothing.

When Thor emerged from the legal department's conference room two weeks later, he looked like a man in shock. His face held the stunned expression of one who had just seen his whole bright, shining world suddenly reduced to rubble.

"I—I can't believe it," he muttered incredulously. "I don't see how they could reject my report. It was all so plain, the evidence—"

"Circumstantial evidence," Manning reminded him. "You made out a pretty good case for a divorce suit, but to accuse two people of murder you've got to have something a little more solid than a few marital infidelities and the fact that one of the suspects recently took swimming lessons."

"But they were in on it together!" Thor fumed. "You know they were!"

"Sure," said Manning. "I know it and you know it. But as Russ Webb said, 'Getting the picture and proving it are two different things.' We're a big company, Harry. Turn-

ing down an insurance claim that size would make every front page in the country. That fact alone is bad for our image, and then if we couldn't prove our case—well, you can see how it is, Harry."

They walked back to Manning's office. Thor, deep in thought, followed him in.

"I can't believe they're going to pay it," he muttered in the same incredulous tone. "*Three hundred thousand dollars!*"

Manning opened a briefcase on his desk. Into it he began to pack a few papers from the desk drawers.

"That legal department," Thor snorted. "If only they'd *listened* to me."

"They did listen to you," Manning said quietly. "All they heard was a vehement accusation of murder, made by an old man who had no substantial proof to back it up. You've lost your touch, Harry."

Thor stared at him, open-mouthed and silent. Then, after a moment, he said quietly, "Maybe you're right, John. Maybe I am getting old, losing the old instinct—"

"No maybe about it," Manning said flatly. He snapped the briefcase shut and put on his hat. "You missed the boat completely on the Stanley case, Harry. You were in such a big hurry to prove that Herbert Stanley had been murdered that you overlooked the simplest,

most logical possibility of the whole case; the one thing that would have been easier to prove than anything else."

"What are you talking about?" Thor asked.

"The fact," Manning answered, "that Herbert Stanley might never even have been *on* that plane."

Again Thor's jaw dropped in surprise. He sat down heavily, his face gloomy.

"You never did consider that, did you?" said Manning. "And that was one of the first things you *should* have thought of. You yourself heard Russ Webb comment on the smooth surface of Swiss lakes: *Switzerland*, Harry, the one place in the world with banks that accept transfers of large sums of money with no questions asked; the one place where you can declare citizenship and get a passport to any country in the world—"

"You—you think Herbert Stanley is alive?" Thor asked shakily. "In Switzerland?"

"I *know* he is," Manning said quietly. "You see, Harry, I *investigated* the case; all you did was

try to fabricate it to fit your own ideas."

Thor rubbed his forehead with weary fingers, then said, "I'm tired, John. I—I think I *will* give some serious thought to my retirement."

"You do that, Harry," Manning told him. "Think about it all week-end. Then come in Monday morning and break the news." He walked past Thor to the door, then paused thoughtfully. "Tell you what I'll do, Harry. *After* you've retired, I'll see that you get most of the credit when I break the Stanley case. I'll say you turned up some new evidence just before you left. We'll let the big boys upstairs remember you the way you used to be, when you were the best insurance cop in the business. How's that sound, Harry?"

Harry Thor smiled sadly and nodded without speaking.

Manning left the office and walked down the hall. As he waited for the elevator, he was already planning how he would stop Joan Stanley from collecting that three hundred thousand dollars.



Since man cannot grasp all branches of human activity, he can hardly expect to comprehend the arboreal variety.



HAUSER'S DOWSER

NASSER could have gotten more applause in Tel Aviv than I got after my second trick. My wife, Sally, was sitting at a table directly in front of the stage with my boss, Ernest Freeling, his wife, and two other couples. Sally wasn't sitting too close to the table, because she was eight months pregnant. She looked like she was going to cry.

I felt like crying myself, but I took a deep breath. As I walked to the table on the stage where I had placed in a neat row the gun, the knife, the noose, the vial of poison and the dowser, I said a small prayer.

"Hey, You Up There," I ex-

horted silently, "please let this murder trick work."

Ever since Timmy, our six year old, had begun to refer to the Lord as Hey, You Up There, we had all sort of adopted the habit.

Now it occurs to me all of a sudden that you may not know what 'a dowser is. It won't hurt you to know because it can be a lesson in faith, the power of the supernatural, or maybe something else. I'm not sure, after the way it worked for me.

Anyway, what a dowser is is a divining rod.

When I was eight, thirty years ago, growing up on a farm in Iowa, a man came to our new house one morning and asked my father if he'd like to know the best place to dig the well on the property. There was no village water supply out where we were. My father, Francis Hauser II, and his father, Francis Hauser, before him had always believed in dowsers.

"Sure," said my father to this man, "you're a dowser, correct?"

"Yes," said the man.

It seemed, as my father explained to me later, the man or operator, *and* the instrument itself are both called dowsers. This man took his instrument out of what looked like an old piece of burlap, wrapped

around it. Of course it was nothing more than a long, forked twig from a willow tree.

The man walked around, holding one part of the fork of the twig in his right hand, and the other in his left. He held both parts very close to his body and he had either a mystical or a stupid look on his face as he walked slowly and purposefully all over the big area that might be called the backyard.

The stem of the forked twig, of course, was pointed straight out ahead of him. He walked around like this for maybe a half hour. Then, all of a sudden, at a spot about thirty yards to the left of the northeast corner of the house, the stem of the dowser dipped sharply toward the ground. My father, my three older brothers, and my mother had all been traipsing around after the man, fascinated.

As the stem dipped, he said in a spooky, low voice, "Yes, yes, yes, here you will find water. Here, here, pure, sweet, crystal water."

And you know? We did.

My dad had the well dug right there on the spot where the dowser and his dowser indicated, and it was the finest well in the county.

I told my father I didn't really believe the divining rod had a power of its own. "That man knows some other way where a

good spot for a well is, and he just points the stem down himself," I insisted.

"Son, you're wrong. Dowsters have been used for centuries and will be for all of time. Some even find valuable minerals, like gold and silver, not just water. No one needs to force a divining rod to point."

Now I was going to show these three hundred some-odd members of our local Securities and Brokerage Association and their wives how a dowser could find a murderer. I had one that pointed by itself and I didn't care at whom. It was all just for fun, of course; or that's what I thought then.

Why I was so nervous about it was because I'm not really a professional magician or mentalist. I'm a securities salesman—low man on the totem pole, I hate to admit, of all twenty-three of the salesmen at Terwilliger, Freeling, Bannister and Weed. Magic is my hobby and I like to make up my own tricks every once in a while. My first two tricks, a cigarette trick and a card stunt, weren't really all that bad.

It was just that I was following Darrell Channing on the bill at this annual banquet of our association where we put together a show of talent from one firm each year.

Channing is our company's

number one salesman, and a great joke and story teller. I'm sure any time he wants to quit selling stocks, he could be a professional comedian. He's also one of the most obnoxious guys I have ever known, a pseudo-playboy bachelor who considers himself a real lady-killer. That type.

He was standing in the wing at the right side of the stage as I walked over to the table to pick up my dowser. "Hey, Francisssss," he hissed, so loud that some of the people at the first row of tables must have heard him. "It doesn't make any difference if you kill *yourself* with *all* those weapons, you're dead anyway."

I pretended it didn't bother me. I picked up my dowser and walked back to the center of the stage.

"There is a murderer in this banquet hall," I announced. The quaver in my voice actually helped because it sounded as though I were emotional rather than nervous.

"The murder was committed with one of those weapons," I indicated the lethal items on the table, "and this dowser, this divining rod, is going to tell us which weapon was used in the killing, and who did it."

I then gave them a brief explanation of a dowser, much as I've told it to you. I seemed to be losing

them. There was some restless shuffling of feet and chairs, and some giggling and talking. From the wing, Channing hissed, "Get back to the murder before they all walk out."

"May I have four gentlemen from the audience come up to the stage, please?" I asked. "Any four gentlemen whom I have not had the pleasure of meeting before? Any four, please."

Channing pranced in from the wing. "I did it, Francis, I confess. I did it," he said in a falsetto.

Even with that he got a laugh. He pranced off into the wing again as, here and there from the audience, several men rose and headed toward the stage.

The first one up got me more worried and nervous than ever. He was either drunk or in a daze or both. He was a huge man, maybe six-three and extremely heavy. Stolidly, dully, he walked up to me, and I took his arm and helped him up the short step to the stage.

"Thank you, sir."

I went to the other side of the stage and assisted a short, stout, red-faced man up; then an aggressive young salesman-type, and finally a middle-aged man with glasses, whom I recognized as head of another important securities firm.

I took them over to the table, and lined them up facing the audience. "One of you men," I said as dramatically as I could, "is a murderer. I would like each of you, in turn, to step up to the table and take one of these tools of death."

The huge, dull-looking man, nodding his head over and over, walked to the table and took the noose. He held it in his two big hands and stared down at it. The stout man with the high blood pressure selected the poison, and examined it with great fascination as he got back to his place in line. He opened the vial and sniffed it. The young salesman took the knife and brandished it wildly at the audience, making fierce, comic faces. The distinguished, middle-aged man with the glasses took the gun, and quietly held it down at his side.

It seemed to me it was getting hotter and hotter in the room. I could feel the perspiration beaded on my forehead and the dampness around my collar. My hand, holding the dowser, was wet and slippery.

All that I needed now, of course, was for the dowser to point properly to one of the four men, anyone of them. I had made all the other preparations that very morning, and I had tested the dowser, of

course, the day I got the idea for this trick.

It was just the previous Saturday. I had been out mowing the lawn, paying little attention to what I was doing, worrying about how we were going to get along when the new baby came. On my salary and commissions we were running a little more into debt each week as it was.

I almost blinded myself by looking up as Charlie, our big collie, darted across my path after a squirrel. My eye was a fraction of an inch from a thick, forked branch of our old willow. In the strange way such things often happen, an instant and vivid memory, fullblown, of the dowser on my father's farm flashed inside my head. I stopped mowing. I went to the garage and got my small ax, chopped down the branch with the fork and stripped it of leaves.

Then another mystifying minor episode in this chain took place. In the kitchen, Sally had the four boys, Francis IV, eight; Tommy, seven; Timmy, six; and Mike, five, standing in a line in front of her.

She looked like a pretty Humpty Dumpty in her pink maternity dress as she shook her finger at them. "Now, you tell me," she was demanding, "which one of

you kids ate that last piece of chocolate cake without asking?"

"Hold it, Miss Humpty Dumpty," I said. "I will solve this mystery with my faithful, magic dowser."

I walked down the small line of boys, holding a fork of the dowser in each hand, close to my body, pointing the long stem at them. I was extremely careful not to hold the dowser so I would cause it to dip. If it dipped, I wanted it to dip purely of its own volition. Each time I walked by I moved in a little closer. The third time down the line, the stem dipped at Francis IV. I was positive that I had not changed my grip on the two sides of the fork.

"Did you eat the cake, Francis?" I asked.

He nodded solemnly. "Yes, I'm sorry, Dad—I . . . I . . ."

So now all the dowser needed to do this evening one week later in the Victorian Room of the hotel, as I walked back and forth in front of the four men on the stage, was dip just like it dipped at Francis. Again I was most careful to hold it so it would dip, if it did, by its own powers—and it did. It dipped the fourth time I walked by, in front of the big man, who still seemed in a stupor.

"Fine," I said. "Will you step



forward, sir? Just a step or two."

He did, a dull, sullen expression on his face.

"Now," I said, turning toward the audience, "will the man in the chair closest to the first door, there on the left side of the room, please reach under his chair?"

I guess ninety-nine percent of the people in that room reached under their chairs. Naturally they suspected some kind of trick, but none of them, except the man I designated, found anything under his chair.

He stood and raised his hand, holding a folded sheet of white paper about six inches square.

"Would you unfold the paper and hold it up for everyone to see, please?"

He did.

In large black letters on the 24 inch by 24 inch sheet of paper it said: **THE MAN WITH THE NOOSE IS THE MURDERER.**

The applause started when I said to the man with the noose, "Thank you, Mr. Murderer." I held out my hand. "Your name, please?"

"Harrison," he said dully but clearly.

Then from the left side of the room, a young red-haired man with long legs and broad shoulders

raced down the side of the room, leaped up on the stage, grabbed Mr. Harrison's coat front and said tensely, "Mr. Harrison, you're under arrest."

From closer to the stage, just one table away from Sally, as a matter of fact, a gray-haired man hopped up onto the stage. "What's happening here?" he demanded. I recognized him. He covered our banquets each year. He was Ray Colby, the financial editor of the local paper.

His story of the event the following day was crystal clear. In the early hours of the morning before the banquet, Mr. Harrison, who was a securities analyst, caught his wife with another man. When the man left, Harrison and his wife had a bitter argument. Both of them apparently were heavy drinkers. Harrison strangled her. Then he fell asleep in a drunken stupor. About 6 p.m. he got up and started drinking again, very heavily.

He told the police that he was very much in love with his wife. He said she had been cheating on him for years, but he never wanted to face it. He had never actually caught her before. That was one of the reasons he drank so much. He told the officers that he wasn't upset that they caught him.

He wasn't trying to get away with murder. He knew they would

find him sooner or later and he didn't care. He was at the banquet only because another securities analyst, who worked in the same office and was a good friend of his, had found him in a bar and dragged him along.

When I went into my murder routine, it seemed to Harrison's liquor-muddled mind that this was a good, simple way to give himself up. Just before my act at the banquet started, they had discovered Mrs. Harrison's body, and the police had launched an immediate search for Mr. Harrison. The banquet was just one spot they were covering, of course.

Ray Colby's story was not only crystal clear, but also made very dramatic use of the fact that my dowser had actually fingered the murderer.

That banquet was about three months ago, and while I dislike profiting by other people's misfortunes, I must say that for almost twelve weeks now I have been Terwilliger, Freeling, Bannister and Weed's number one salesman. For some reason, many people seem to feel that a man who is a dowser is also very likely to have a little extra ability to forecast what the stock market is going to do. My recommendations to customers, of course, aren't any different than

they ever were, just sound and conservative, based on all the material the firm gives us to work with. Yet lots of people feel they're special.

That obnoxious character, Darrell Channing, is purple with envy. It's the first time in ten years he hasn't been the firm's leading salesman. When the baby was born two months ago, he suggested we name him Dowser Hauser. Imagine that fink. We named him Daniel.

Naturally I never told anybody how my dowser trick worked. It was simple. The morning of the banquet, I had planted the note for the noose under the chair I designated.

I had planted a similar note for the knife under a large artificial flower pot at the rear right-hand corner of the room; one for the gun under a similar pot in the left-hand corner, and a note for the vial of poison under the blotter on the table at which they took tickets to the banquet at the entrance to the room.

Wherever, of course, the dowser

dipped I would have "found the murderer." It is a complete mystery to me why it dipped at Mr. Harrison rather than one of the other three men.

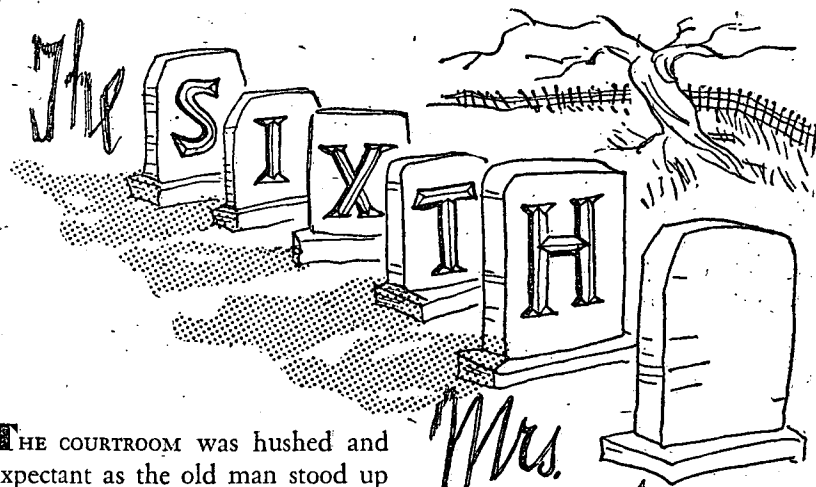
Johnny Knowles, the detective who arrested Mr. Harrison, has really been bugging me to tell him how the dowser works. As a matter of fact, yesterday he called and asked me to come down to headquarters to see if the dowser could identify a burglar out of a lineup of four people they were holding as suspects. I turned him down cold.

Maybe the dowser could find his real burglar. It did point to Francis, who ate the last piece of chocolate cake, and it did point to Mr. Harrison, who had actually killed his wife. But I don't know if it could point, properly, to guilty criminals every time or even once more. It hangs in a frame on the wall behind me in my office these days, and it's going to stay there.

One other thing my father taught me. Quit while you're ahead.



An avaricious nimrod with his limit of quail may take one more shot—to his dismay—when he spies the biggest bird of all.



THE COURTROOM was hushed and expectant as the old man stood up and read from the paper. The words were definite, but there seemed just the slightest hint of reluctance—or perhaps doubt—in his voice.

"We, the jury, find the defendant, Arthur Pendrake, not guilty."

A few men in the rear, reporters no doubt, slipped out quietly to file their stories. Among those who stayed there was a subdued bab-

Mrs.
Pendrake

ble, the general tone of which seemed to be one of dismay, but there were also many wise noddings of heads. The verdict had been rather expected.

The one most concerned sat im-

by C.B. GILFORD

passive. Arthur Pendrake was a fine-looking man, slim, wide-shouldered, with wavy, silvered hair. He had been on trial for murder, but his patrician face was gentle, his blue eyes benign. He listened to the fateful decision, and by not even a flicker of a smile or a slightly more relaxed breath did he betray satisfaction or relief.

Costello, his lawyer, leaned across to him and whispered, "See, I told you, they didn't have sufficient evidence."

Pendrake nodded. He had known that.

Later, when the formalities were over and Arthur Pendrake was legally and physically a free man, Lieutenant Dunphy stopped him on his way out of the courthouse building. Dunphy was short and rotund, with the appropriate face of a small bulldog.

"Well, Mr. Pendrake," Dunphy said, "I guess you won."

Pendrake permitted himself a wry smile and extended a well-manicured hand. "Then I presume it's goodbye, Lieutenant. Since I can't be tried twice for the same alleged crime, that is."

The policeman pretended he didn't see the hand. "Maybe it isn't goodbye, Mr. Pendrake," he said instead. "The verdict today was just on Wife Number Five. There are always the other four."

Arthur Pendrake smiled a bit wider. "Haven't the police anything better to do than the things you amuse yourself with, Dunphy? Practically your entire case was built around the coincidence that I had had four previous wives, all of whom predeceased me. Now if you couldn't come up with sufficient criminal evidence in the death of Louise, how could you hope to do it in the deaths of Cynthia, Ruth, Josephine, and Elizabeth? Besides, Lieutenant, each one of them died and is buried in a different city. That's quite a trail you would have to follow."

"You have left quite a trail, Mr. Pendrake."

"Regretfully, this is goodbye."

"There's always the future, Mr. Pendrake. You might get married again."

"I rather doubt that."

"You figure you have enough money already, is that it?"

"I have been, shall we say, fortunate in that one respect—and I certainly wouldn't look forward to a marriage in which you would be my best man and forever afterward my watchdog. And now, Lieutenant, this really must be goodbye. Don't bother wondering where I am or having me shadowed. I shall be resident at the Castle Club. That's a bachelors' establishment,

you know. But of course you do."

Pendrake stepped around the policeman and walked away, out of the building, into the bright sunshine, and down the broad granite steps. At the bottom of these, however, just as he was about to hail a taxi, a woman dashed directly into his path, then stood there, confronting him.

"Bravo, Mr. Pendrakel!" she squealed, clapping her hands like a schoolgirl.

Yet she was considerably more than a schoolgirl. Though her skin was smooth on the planes of her face, there were telltale wrinkles in the corners and crevices. Arthur Pendrake was accustomed to measuring such items. Her waist was thin rather than matronly thick, but tight corseting might have accomplished that. A dye or rinse might have darkened her hair. Her eyes were blue, her makeup demure. Forty perhaps; not unattractive.

"I beg your pardon," he said, drawing back.

"Congratulations."

"For what?" He knew, of course.

"Your acquittal. I saw the entire trial from first to last. The prosecution had no case."

"So the jury decided." He drew back again a little, trying to go around her.

Ever so subtly, without seeming actually to move, she still managed to bar his path. "But it was a close call, wasn't it, Mr. Pendrake? I mean, closer than the time before anyway."

He gave her a hard stare, but her face seemed completely open and frank. "What exactly do you mean?" he asked.

"With your first three wives, nobody paid much attention. With your fourth, there was some official suspicion. Now this time you were actually brought to trial. Maybe you've gotten a little careless, Mr. Pendraké."

"I beg your pardon?"

She smiled innocently. "Or maybe it was just the coincidence catching up with you. Or the law of averages. Or maybe you've just lost your touch."

"My touch?"

"At murder."

She was faintly amusing, Pendrake thought. "You congratulated me on my acquittal, but you believe I was guilty."

"Oh, everybody is quite sure you were guilty, Mr. Pendrake. No one could prove it, that's all. You'll really have to be very careful next time."

"I don't plan a next time."

"You don't? How dreadful! What a waste! You're such a charming man, Mr. Pendrake."



He decided to play along with the game. "But, my dear lady," he pointed out, "if everyone is quite convinced I'm a murderer, I shall be condemned to loneliness. No

woman would dream of taking a chance on me with the reputation I have."

She surprised him completely. "How wrong you are, Mr. Pen-

drake," she said. "Your reputation is the very thing that many women find most fascinating about you. I myself, for one."

He stared at her.

"And I happen to have a quality that you have found fascinating in women, Mr. Pendrake. I'm rich."

He must have given some sign that he didn't believe her, a sneering smile perhaps, or a quizzical frown. Anyway, she accepted his challenge. Without taking her eyes from him, she waved lightly toward someone or something behind him. Over his shoulder he saw a long black limousine approaching. It eased silently to the curb just beside them, and a liveried chauffeur hopped out and held open a door.

"May I drop you somewhere?" the woman asked him.

Almost unwillingly he accepted the invitation, found himself inside that elegant automobile, sitting beside this amazing woman, being whisked along in quiet luxury. With great reluctance he revealed his destination. "The Castle Club," he said, and he knew when he said it that he was betraying a vital secret.

Her name was Fern Spencer, and she was indeed wealthy. He verified this fact very early in their relationship. Besides, she was most

eager to supply him with all pertinent information. Her father had been most successful. Was she worth a million? Oh, several. Ten, perhaps, if it were all added up. Pendrake experienced a distinct uneasiness being this close to so much money.

"Did any of your wives have that much money?" she asked him one day as they lunched together.

"I'm afraid not," he had to admit.

"Were they wealthy at all?"

"Well fixed, you might say."

"And you inherited each time?"

"Yes." He might as well tell her, since he had the feeling that she knew anyway.

"How much were they worth?"

"Louise, my last wife, left me in the neighborhood of a hundred thousand."

"And the others?"

"Somewhat less."

"Arthur dear, you sold yourself much too cheaply."

"I beg your pardon?" He didn't appreciate outspokenness on such a delicate subject.

"A man of your charm is worth a great deal more than a hundred thousand. And to commit murder for such a paltry sum . . ."

"Now, Fern . . ."

"Surely we're friends. We can be frank."

"Do you actually imagine I com-

mitted five murders?" he demanded.

"Darling, I know you did."

He shouldn't have continued seeing her. He should have broken it off. If necessary, he should have run away somewhere where she couldn't find him.

Instead, he lingered, and while he was at it, he did a bit of investigating. Fern Spencer, it turned out, was a widow.

"Whatever happened to Jeffrey, your first husband?" he asked her after a month of their friendship.

The question took her by surprise. At first she colored with embarrassment, then recovered to give him a cold, distant look, masking what, he did not know.

"He died," she said finally.

"Yes, I know that. But how?"

Her cold look became one of suspicion. "You seem to have been prying. Why didn't you pry a little further and find the answer to that yourself?"

"I did the best I could," he admitted candidly. "Jeffrey apparently died in an automobile accident."

"Yes, that's how he died. Six years ago."

"And you didn't remarry?"

"No."

He waited for the details, but they weren't forthcoming. In fact, the entire conversation was finished, the whole evening ruined. He didn't see her for almost a

week afterward. Whereas, before she'd been always calling him, sending him notes, invitations, even little gifts, now she withdrew completely, as if she'd moved to another planet.

Meanwhile he dug through old newspaper files. Six years ago, she had said. Anything that happened to someone with ten million dollars would surely have been reported.

It had happened in California, he discovered. Jeffrey and Fern Spencer had been driving down from one of those mountain lake resorts—too fast on an unfamiliar road. The car had skidded off the edge on a hairpin turn. Jeffrey Spencer, driving, had ridden the car to the bottom of the ravine and perished in the flaming wreck. Fern Spencer, his passenger, had been thrown clear partway down, suffered critical injuries, but was expected to survive.

Pendrake spent several days searching the files for subsequent references to the accident, but the newspapers, considering who the Spencers were, kept a rather discreet silence. Had Jeffrey Spencer, for instance, been drinking on that fatal ride? Perhaps it hadn't mattered to the authorities. After all, it was himself Spencer had killed. There was no official investigation. Jeffrey Spencer was buried in Cali-

fornia. Six months or so later there was a brief notation that Fern Spencer had returned to the city, apparently recovered from her injuries.

Pendrake inquired in another direction. Had any part of Fern's ten million come from Jeffrey Spencer? None, as far as he could discover. Jeffrey Spencer had been an obscure young man in the employ of John Larkin, Fern's father, but he hadn't risen very far in the business, even after Larkin's death. Perhaps he'd been inadequate, or hadn't wanted to. Perhaps he'd even been a fortune hunter. Arthur Pendrake wouldn't hold that against him, of course. Jeffrey Spencer's mistake was that he had neglected to outlive his wife.

When Fern recovered from her pout eventually, she renewed her assault on Pendrake almost as if nothing had happened. "Miss me, Arthur dearest?" she asked him.

"I might have."

"Of course you did. Don't deny it. You're a man convicted of murder by public opinion if not by law. You're an outcast. Who besides me will have anything to do with you? You simply must have been lonely."

He smiled. The Castle Club, since he was not a convicted criminal, had been tolerant enough not to oust him, but people had been a

bit cold, pointedly avoided him.

"Why don't you marry me, Arthur?"

"Fern!"

"Don't pretend to be surprised. You've known all along that it's what I've been leading up to."

"Well, yes. . ."

"I'm the only woman in town you'll get a proposal from. And I'm worth ten million, Arthur."

"I really don't need the money."

"Not at the moment perhaps. But you like to live well. You appreciate the comforts. You don't know how to work. Your money won't last forever. Ten million would guarantee you luxury for the rest of your life."

He sat down beside her, taking her hand—an affectionate gesture he'd never attempted before—and looked searchingly into her eyes. "You've made something of a case for my marrying you, Fern," he said. "But I can't understand why you should want to marry me."

She squeezed his hand, returning his gaze tenderly. Yet behind the glaze of affection that filmed her eyes, what secret lay hidden? "I'm a woman," she answered. "We women do not operate according to your masculine logic, Arthur dear. I began to admire you when you were fighting for your life in that courtroom, and I've grown terribly fond of you."

A fortnight later, and scarcely two months after he was acquitted of the charge of murdering the fifth Mrs. Pendrake, Arthur acquired a sixth.

The wedding received very good press coverage, even though they'd intended it as a very quiet, private affair. Some reporter got wind of



the license having been issued, and made a headline of it. Lieutenant Dunphy of Homicide attended without an invitation.

"You're a cool one, Mr. Pendrake," he said with grudging admiration.

Arthur tried to ignore the policeman, but couldn't.

"You're pushing your luck, I want to warn you of that. Maybe it's worth it though, huh? Playing for really big stakes this time. What kind of a nut is this Spencer dame

anyway? Thinks she's going to reform you, does she? Or do you plan to settle down this time and live happily ever after? Or should I ask, is the new Mrs. Pendrake going to live happily ever after? I'm real interested, and I'm going to watch—like a hawk. You're going to become my hobby, Mr. Pendrake."

Which was not an auspicious beginning.

The honeymoon was not promising either. Fern, who before marriage had expressed a fondness for him, now was strangely distant and detached. They went on a West Indies cruise, but the romantic atmosphere failed utterly. Fern did not melt into his arms like an eager bride. Instead, rather like Lieutenant Dunphy had promised to do, she seemed to be watching him all the time. Not exactly spying, just observing with keen interest.

"Arthur," she asked him one day at the rail of the ship, "did any of your other wives know your past?"

"That I'd been married before, do you mean? Of course. I didn't lie to them."

"No, I don't mean that. Did they know how you had disposed of your previous wives?"

He was amused. "Of course not."

There was a curious brightness

in her eyes, mischievous, cunning, he thought. "Then I'm the only one of your wives who was forewarned," she said.

"Forewarned? Of what?"

"Of impending doom."

This time he didn't know whether to be amused or not. "My dear," he asked her, "do you actually think I intend to murder you?"

"Don't you?"

"And you married me, courted me, thinking that?"

"Of course, darling. But this time, naturally, you'll have to be much more stealthy and careful about it, because I know what you're up to. And more important, Lieutenant Dunphy knows."

"Fern, stop it!" She sounded as if she were seriously advising him.

"What's the matter?"

"You're talking nonsense. I have no intention of harming a hair on your head."

"I really didn't expect you to come right out and announce it."

Later, still exasperated, he argued with her. "Fern, why on earth should I want to kill you?"

"Well, there were those other wives of yours . . ."

"So it's bound to happen again, is that it? I'm acting under a compulsion. A pattern of marriage and murder? I'm some sort of psychotic, is that what you think?"

"Oh dear no, Arthur. You're

very cool and deliberate. You want ten million dollars."

"But I already have ten million. I'm your husband."

She arched her eyebrows. "Oh, but you don't have it. I haven't cut you in on anything. You've just taken the first step toward that ten million."

Yet on their return, and having settled into the big family mansion, the first thing Fern attended to was a legal matter. A team of lawyers labored on the project. Arthur was shown the new will and had it explained to him. He had become Fern's sole heir. On her death he would get everything.

"Are you completely mad?" he asked Fern when he got her alone. "You've carefully arranged things so I can't touch one penny of your money while you're alive, but I become immensely rich when you're dead."

"But Arthur dear," she protested calmly, "you married me for my money, didn't you?"

"I never said that."

"And you're not so awfully fond of me that you want to share the money with me. You'd much prefer to have it all to yourself. Well, that's simply the way I've arranged it."

He couldn't fathom her. His reputation had attracted her. She'd married him with her eyes open.

Now she was issuing him an invitation to try to murder her; daring him, almost.

But watching him. Or pretending to watch him. Pretending to be careful of everything she ate and drank. Pretending to be suspicious and on her guard. It was like a game, a cat-and-mouse game, but who was the cat? And who the mouse?

Madness, yes, but in every madness there's a method. He would have to discover the particular madness of Fern Larkin Spencer Pendrake.

On Monday afternoons it was his habit to take a taxi downtown and have a personal chat with his stockbroker. Arthur was a speculator, jumping in and out of the market on a swing of a point or two. This meant keeping close tabs, and on Monday afternoons, regularly, he'd go down to the broker's office, study the board, and plot the week's strategy.

Only on this particular Monday he'd forgotten, quite stupidly, the small notebook wherein he'd jotted his inspirations of the past several days. A mile from the house he instructed the cab driver to turn around and go back. But they didn't turn in the big circular drive for, at the other end of it, Fern's limousine was just coming

out. *Where could she be going?*

"Follow that car," Arthur shouted at his driver.

Their route led away from downtown, through a suburb, and seemingly toward open countryside. The chase ended abruptly when the limousine slowed suddenly, turned and entered a wide drive through an open iron gate that interrupted a low stone wall: a cemetery.

Arthur ordered his cab to halt at the entrance. Over the wall he could still see the car. It went for a hundred yards or so, finally stopped. Fern, dressed all in black, was let out of the car by her chauffeur, then walked quickly across the greensward alone.

Arthur told his cabbie to wait, slipped inside the cemetery, but stayed back close to the wall, taking a path parallel to his wife's. She walked for some distance, and since the place was heavily planted with trees, she must have almost gotten out of the chauffeur's sight. At long last she halted—at a grave surely—seeming to hesitate for a moment, then knelt on the turf.

Arthur was too overcome by curiosity merely to remain where he was. He stalked her. She was kneeling with her back toward him, and the intervening trees more or less shielded him from the chauffeur's gaze, should that

individual have been interested enough to keep a protective eye on his mistress.

Slowly, stealthily, unobtrusively, Arthur made his approach. Fern did not move, except perhaps to sink back on her heels, lower and lower, till she made only a small black lump on the green earth. As Arthur drew very close, he noticed that her face was buried in her hands and her shoulders shook. She was sobbing!

Curiosity drove him forward the rest of the way, curiosity and a dawning anger. He advanced silently over the soft ground till he stood just behind his crouching wife and read over her shoulder the name on the low simple stone: *Jeffrey Spencer*.

Feeling somehow betrayed, victimized, Arthur found himself hating the man under the sod there, and hating too the weeping woman in widow's black, the wife they shared. With cold fury and contempt, he deliberately and loudly coughed.

Fern heard him and looked over her shoulder. Her face, he saw, was contorted with grief and wet with tears. Through her tears she recognized him; and painfully struggled to her feet. He didn't try to assist her.

It was her lack of contrition over being caught in this duplicity, her

scorn of pretense, her not bothering even to look guilty, that sent him into a complete rage. He seized her shoulders and shook her, much harder than the sobs had shaken her.

"How dare you!" he shouted. "Why did you pursue me? Why did you marry me? Interested, you said. Fascinated, you said. You deceived me. Every minute was a deceit. Every word was a lie!"

She nodded convulsively, agreeing with him. "Yes . . . yes . . . I loved Jeffrey . . . never anybody but Jeffrey . . . I lied to you . . . so kill me . . . go ahead and kill me . . ."

Later, he went to her sitting room and found her there. "What is it all about?" he challenged her. "Some terrible feeling of guilt?"

She hesitated only a moment. Then, "I killed Jeffrey."

"I thought so."

"Oh, not in any deliberate, planned way. Not the way you commit murder, Arthur, but I'm guilty nevertheless. Jeffrey and I had an awful argument. He'd been inattentive, I thought. Had too much of an eye for other women. So I accused him of having married me for my money. We had a dreadful row. Jeffrey started drinking. I should never have let him drive, but I was blinded by hatred

and jealousy and hurt pride. All the way down the mountain I goaded him, said nasty things to him. I didn't even notice how fast he was driving . . ."

"So you believe you killed him?"

"I murdered him."

"If you insist."

"I was thrown out of the car and badly injured. Why didn't I die then? I deserved to. I wanted to. But I was a coward. My instinct for self-preservation was too strong. I clung to life. Later on I tried to commit suicide. I was still a coward at the last moment. Since Jeffrey's death I must have tried a dozen times."

Arthur nodded. He'd been right. "Then you heard about me. And you hired me, as it were, to be your executioner."

She looked at him, her eyes very bright. "Oh, you put it so well, Arthur. Yes, my executioner, for a fee of ten million dollars. It will be perfect poetic justice. I wronged Jeffrey by accusing him of marrying me for my money. Now to be murdered—punished—by a husband who actually did marry me for that reason . . ."

She was mad, of course, as he had feared. He doubted if sessions with a psychiatrist or any other such half-measures would succeed with her. Prompted by strong feelings of guilt, she had a genuine

and sincere death-wish. Most extraordinary. She'd be hard to argue with.

"Quite ingenious, my dear," he said. "You hire a renowned murderer, pay him a most ample fee. Ought to get the job done. Except that you overlook one factor. Lieutenant Dunphy. Now if I disposed of you, my dear, I wouldn't stand a chance of eluding Dunphy. Even if I were very clever about it, any jury would crucify me on the mere fact of the coincidence. No, dearest, I'm afraid I'll have to disappoint you."

The madness—or whatever it was that possessed her—had begun to flicker again in her eyes. She advanced a step toward him, menacing, causing him involuntarily to retreat.

"You won't even try?"

"Fern, darling, I'd be as dead as you."

The fire in her eyes blazed even brighter. "You deceiver! You cheat! You lamb in wolf's clothing! You married me under false pretenses! You're a wife-killer, why do you stop now? You'll inherit more from me than from all the rest put together. Why do you refuse now?"

"Fern, I explained to you, I don't dare . . ."

She was in such a frenzy by then, clenching and unclenching her fists, her eyes so aflame, froth-

ing at the mouth almost, that he was suddenly afraid that it was she who might murder him. Hastily and ignominiously he retreated to his own room, where he locked the door and found himself breathing very hard.

Arthur was still alone, and it was near midnight, when the fear seized him. He had kept to his room, pondering his situation, trying to make plans and failing, when now suddenly a new and frightful possibility occurred to him. He unlocked his door, flew down the hall, and burst into Fern's room.

What he saw there instantly confirmed his worst suspicions. His wife was sitting at her desk, and before her, littering the entire surface of the desk, was a motley array of bottles—all shapes and sizes and colors, some with their caps off, some with their contents poured into the half dozen or so drinking glasses scattered around. She was absorbed by her collection.

He crossed the room to where she sat, seized her, lifted her from the chair, and shook her violently. "What have you taken?" he screamed at her. "For pity's sake, tell me what it was. I'll find the antidote. Hurry . . ."

She didn't struggle in his grip,

but remained limp, compliant, and gradually a smile came to her lips, a smile of smugness, defiance, disdain, and she didn't answer his desperate questions.

Finally, despairingly, he let her go. She sat in her chair again, while he paced and roamed the room. Once he stopped beside her desk, and with a violent gesture of his arm, swept all the bottles and glasses off, and sent them crashing to the floor. Liquids and pills spilled everywhere, but she didn't notice. She kept right on smiling at him.

"Don't you realize what you are doing to me?" he moaned. "Lieutenant Dunphy is going to arrest me. He won't pay any attention to fingerprints or anything like that. I can go right on denying it. The jury won't listen either. This time they'll hang me. Ye gods, Fern, why did you have to drag me into your life? What did I ever do to you?"

Finally reason superseded emotion. The telephone had fallen to the floor in the midst of the debris. He knelt in the mess, grabbed the instrument, and commenced dialing frantically.

"Whom are you calling?" she asked calmly.

"The operator. She can find a doctor."

"Don't bother."

"He'll have something. Stomach pump maybe."

"It won't be necessary, Arthur. I didn't take anything."

"What!" He dropped the phone and stared at her. "I don't believe you."

"You should. I told you I was a coward. Believe me, when you refused my simple request, I was desperate. I assembled all these bottles and studied their contents. Some of them are quite poisonous, I'm sure. But I lost my nerve. I couldn't swallow anything. I'm still a coward somehow."

She was so straightforward and sincere that he couldn't help believing her. He rose from the littered floor, brushing himself off. Feeling relieved, he laughed thinly, shrilly.

"I'm glad, I'm really glad, Fern," he said. "I don't think you're a coward at all. You just have too much basic will to live, that's all. You really don't want to die. This notion of yours was a lot of nonsense, wasn't it?"

She continued to smile at him, but there was something grim in the way she shook her head in disagreement. "Not at all, Arthur. I haven't changed my mind in the least. I had a great deal of faith in you—experienced murderer and all that—but you disappointed me. You're as much of a coward as I

am. You lost your nerve when the really big money was at stake. So now I'll have to look elsewhere."

Alert, with a small chill creeping up his spine, he asked her, "Elsewhere? What do you mean by that?"

"I offered you ten million to do the job. You refused. You're already too well-fixed, I suppose. Now I intend to hire someone else. It'll probably cost a lot less. Should have done it that way the first time. Someone really tough. A gunman perhaps . . ."

"No, Fern!" He was on his knees again, this time directly in front of her, holding out both hands beseechingly. "They'll be sure to think it was I who hired him!"

She smiled sweetly. "Let them think it!" she said.

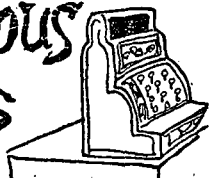
Arthur Pendrake sat alone again in his darkened room, deeply absorbed in a most pressing problem. He had begged, and Fern had finally relented. She would give him two weeks, she'd said, and no more. Two weeks, or she'd hire someone who could really do the job.

He stared at the wall, and his brain was just as blank and empty. The question pounded dully, painfully, in his brain. *How—oh, how—does one go about committing a murder?*

When a field of endeavor becomes too perilous and unprofitable to pursue, the sagacious man knows it is time for a change.



Robbery is a Hazardous Business



by
L. L. POTEET

WHEN the man in the gray topcoat stepped into the liquor store, Beekham knew there was going to be trouble. He had learned to sense these things. Standing quietly behind the cash register, he chewed thoughtfully on his lower lip.

It was getting to be a real problem. A breakdown in the law, or something, was producing a crime rise all out of proportion to the norm.

Beekham read the FBI Bulletin monthly and the statistics were alarming. Every category of crime was up—murder, assault, arson, robbery—especially robbery, and especially in Los Angeles where the late-night liquor stores were

fair game for every prowling criminal. He had been seriously thinking about another type of operation. For the risks involved, the returns were becoming shorter and shorter.

The man in the gray topcoat had reached the counter and Beekham was not surprised when the gun jutted forward in a blurring motion and held steady about two inches above his navel. He would have been surprised if the man had not produced the gun.

"Do like you're told and you won't get hurt. This is a stickup!"

"I gathered as much," said Beek-

ham, taking in the robber's thinning blond hair and broad, venal face. "You are really quite obvious, you know. I spotted you the moment you came in."

For all his thinning hair the robber was chronologically youthful, as so many of them were these days. *And quite stupid*, thought Beekham, looking into the deep-set eyes. *Definitely the primitive sort.*

"Don't try nothing," said the gunman. "One wrong move and I shoot."

"Yes, I know. You're the violent type. You've killed before, haven't you? You don't necessarily enjoy killing, but if something gets in your way, you smash it."

"You some kind of a nut or something?"

Beekham smiled up at him from behind his glasses. "Merely an observer of the human species," he said. "Now take you, for instance. I don't see how you've kept from getting killed. You come in here with all the earmarks of a predator, a cougar circling his prey while trying to appear disinterested. How have you managed to stay alive?"

"Whatta you mean?"

"I could have shot you a dozen times," said Beekham. "I don't think you're going to last much longer at your trade. You're not

suited to it at all. I could have been armed, or there could have been a police stake-out. I was reading in the papers just the other day—"

"Keep your hands on the counter," warned the gunman, his eyes darting this way and that.

"Oh, you have nothing to fear this time," said Beekham. "I don't have a gun. They are much too dangerous. No, my friend, you are perfectly safe from me. I was just thinking about the danger you put yourself in. Robbery is really a hazardous profession. Someday—or night—one of your victims is going to shoot first. Now take your *modus operandi*, for instance."

"I'd rather have the dough," said the gunman. "Quit stalling. You're up to something."

"You are suspicious," said Beekham, his roundish face one of engaging concern. "You must know the police patrol won't be driving by for another twenty minutes. You did pick the right time for your holdup, or was that a lucky accident, perhaps?"

"Whatta you take me for? I cased the joint good."

"Remarkable," murmured Beekham. "But you must admit you're careless."

"I admit nothing. Whatta you know about stickups, anyway?"

"Quite a lot, really. In my business robbery is never far away. You might say it's sort of an occupational interest."

"Yeah," said the gunman. "I see what you mean. You guys are always getting held up. What's this about my whatchamacallit?"

Beekham smiled benignly and moved a hand toward his coat front. "Can I offer you a cigarette, young man?"

The gun buried itself an inch in Beekham's stomach. "Hold it right there!"

"I was only reaching for my cigarettes," Beekham said reprovingly. "I told you I didn't have a gun. See?" He slowly parted the halves of his coat. "You take awful chances, young man. Especially with a face like—" He shrugged. "Well, you know what I mean."

"I'm beginning not to like you," said the holdup man.

"It's nothing personal, I assure you."

"You got no call to talk about my face. It's not that bad."

"That depends. In your case it is definitely a handicap. Here you are, a robber who looks like a robber. A face like yours arouses suspicion. It puts people on guard. With your, ah, primitive looks, your method of operation is all wrong. I venture you haven't been very successful."

"I do all right; I'm satisfied."

Beekham smiled. "Arrests? Police record? Small returns?"

"Knock it off. You ain't conning me outta this heist."

"Just as you say," shrugged Beekham. "I am only trying to help. I like to see a man make the most of himself. Still, it's your business. Only I'm afraid there won't be much here; hardly worth your trouble."

"Let me worry about that."

"You're sure to get killed. If not this time—soon. Only an adaptable man can survive in this world. Look at all the animals that have become extinct just because they couldn't change, or wouldn't change, as the case may be. Gone . . . Poof . . . No more."

"I'll make out as long as I have my gun. Anybody gets in my way gets dead. It's the only way I know."

"That is a pity," said Beekham. "Oh, well. Survival of the fittest."

"And I'm the fittest," chortled a new voice. "Keep your cool, cats. This is a holdup." The newcomer had padded into the liquor store on rubber sandals.

"Oh, dear," said Beekham, staring up into a pair of tinsel-bright eyes. "Another one."

The new robber was a bearded youth with hair like a sheep dog flowing over a small head. The

gun in his hand jiggled like a baton.

"A trip, a trip," he chanted. "This is so delightful."

"I do hope no one gets killed," Beekham said.

"How macabre you are!" cried the hairy one. "You are a doll. You are the most!"

"I'm a patient man," said Beekham, "but this does pose a problem."

"This is the kookiest heist I ever made," growled the robber in the gray topcoat. "Nobody takes my dough." He whirled savagely on his competitor. "Outta my way, punk. I'll blast you."

"We are having a psychedelic experience," burbled the bearded bandit. "We are in rapport!"

"You're nuts!" said the blond robber. "Hey! Don't point that thing at me. Don't—"

The explosions drowned out his last words as the long-haired one pumped three bullets into the gray topcoat.

Beekham closed his eyes. Then he opened them.

The Beard was conducting his phantom choir in glassy-eyed transport as the blond robber sagged floorward. As his eyes slid past the counter top, Beekham spoke to him sympathetically. "It had to happen, you know, sooner or later. Your method was all

wrong from the very beginning."

The robber didn't answer.

Adaptability, that was the thing. A man had to adapt. Beekham had been thinking about it for some time now. The liquor store operation was becoming much too hazardous. He'd have to take steps to protect his future.

"Would you step over here, young man? Please—just for a moment."

"Are we in rapport?"

The Beard floated within range of Beekham's expertly-swung blackjack. There was hardly a sound as the weighted leather pouch connected with his skull. The lights of delirium winked out of the tinsel-bright eyes.

"Have a nice trip," Beekham said, not unkindly.

He punched the *No Sale* button on the cash register and leafed up the assorted bills, a disappointing take for such a violent evening.

The liquor store clerk was beginning to stir where he lay on the floor behind the counter at Beekham's feet. A trusting chap, he had an egg-size lump above his left ear.

Beekham pocketed the cash with a sigh. Robbing liquor stores was becoming progressively prohibitive, even for a man of his talent. He would have to make some changes.

A sleight hand can be infinitely more intriguing than a discriminating eye.



THE ETHICAL



by
Bill Pronzini

THEY were waiting in my apartment, two men. One, tall and angular, was wearing a tweed jacket and sitting in my leather reclining chair with one leg hanging over the arm. The other, leaning against the wall near the window, was stocky and blue-jowled, and wearing a vacant expression.

I had never seen either of them before but I knew who had sent them, and I knew why they were there.

I shut the door behind me, stood looking at them, and asked, "How did you get in here?"

The angular man shrugged. "Door was unlocked," he said.

"Sure it was." I crossed the room, throwing my overcoat on the couch, and went to the portable bar. I made myself a drink.

"Fat Gus wants to see you," the

angular man said from behind me.

"Later," I said. "I'm going to take a shower and change my clothes."

"Right now," the angular man said. He sounded bored.

I turned, looked at him. "Suppose I don't feel like seeing Fat Gus right now?"

The angular man shrugged again.

I smiled faintly. "I'll bet you both have big black guns inside your coats."

He showed me the big black gun inside his coat. I finished my drink. "Shall we go?" I said.

We went. It took us twenty minutes to get from my apartment in Pacific Heights to *The Poor Richard*, a no-cover, no-minimum fun place in the North Beach section of San Francisco where Fat Gus held court. We climbed back stairs to the office.

Fat Gus, all three hundred and fifty pounds of him, sat behind a blonde walnut desk, resplendent in a pale yellow silk suit, robin's egg blue shirt and paisley tie. Nonetheless, through no fault of his tailor, he looked like a huge lump of pasty clay with hair on it; not much hair at that.

His full name was Gustin Arlington Banazak, and he was a gambler, a procurer, a bookmaker and a just plain crook. He was also, paradoxically, a lover of cats, which undoubtedly pleased the SPCA no end, and was reputed to own fifteen or twenty pedigrees. One, in fact, was sitting on the corner of his desk. Fat and sleek and gray, it was licking its whiskers. Not, I hoped, in anticipation.

Fat Gus waved a hand toward a gallimaufry of black metal to one side. It was, I supposed, one of those ultra-modern atrocities that pass for chairs. It looked uncomfortable. I sat down. It was.

Fat Gus glared at me across his desk. "All right, Parigli," he said. "I ain't going to waste no words

with you. You know what I want."

"Pray don't waste any words," I said.

"Where's the chick?" he asked.

"What chick is that?"

"The Guthrie chick," Fat Gus said. "Where is she, Parigli?"

"I thought I told you that last night."

"So tell me again."

"You really ought to write these things down, Gus," I said. "Your memory isn't very good."

"Don't give me none of your flip mouth," he said. "I asked you, where was the chick?"

I sighed. "She's in a little town near the Oregon border," I said. "Darby Falls. The Buckingham Hotel, room nine."

Fat Gus shook his head. "Try again."

I frowned. "You're trying to tell me something? Give me a minute, maybe I can puzzle it out."

He looked fierce. "Al and Waldo here took a private plane up to this Darby Falls soon as you called yesterday," he said. "She ain't there, Parigli. She never *was* there."

"I don't like to differ with you, Gus," I said, "but she most certainly was there. I *saw* her. In fact, I watched her having lunch in the hotel dining room, and I followed her when she walked down to the corner drugstore."

"Come off it, Parigli," Fat Gus

said. "What are you trying to pull?"

"I'm not trying to pull anything," I said. "That's where she was at four o'clock yesterday afternoon. The desk clerk gave me her room number."

"The desk clerk never seen her. Waldo showed him her picture."

"Then he's lying."

"What for would he lie?"

"Maybe she paid him off," I said, shrugging.

"Where were *you* since yesterday?"

"If you want, I'll write out a timetable."

"Don't get cute," Fat Gus said, a menacing look on his face. "Where *were* you?"

"It's a six hour drive to Darby Falls," I told him. "I was tired, and I spent the night in a motel."

"What motel?"

"The Rosecourt. Outside of Ukiah."

"I could check on that."

"By all means," I said.

"How come you didn't wait there in Darby Falls after you called me?"

"You didn't tell me to."

"That ain't no reason," Fat Gus said. "You should of waited."

"What for?" I asked. "You hired me to find her. That's all. And I found her."

"Damn it," Fat Gus said, "she

ain't *there*. Who are you kidding?"

"She was there yesterday," I said.

"I told you that."

"You know what I think?" Fat Gus said. "I think maybe you're lying to me."

"And why would I be lying to you?"

"Maybe the Guthrie chick paid *you* off, Parigli," he answered. "Maybe she give you a piece of the fifty grand to fix up this phony story about Darby Falls."

"Sure," I said. "She gave me half. I've got it sewn into the lining of my jockey shorts."

"I've had just about enough of your flip mouth, Parigli," Fat Gus said. "You want I should let Waldo here work on your head?"

I looked at Waldo here. He was the blue-jowled one with the vacant expression, but he had arms like most people have waistlines. I turned back to Fat Gus. "No," I said, "I don't think I'd like that at all."

"Then give with some straight answers. I ain't got no more patience left, Parigli. I want that Guthrie dame found, and I want my fifty grand back. You like your health, you better be leveling with me."

"I'm leveling," I said. "Look, Gus, suppose she *had* paid me off, to lie about where she was, I mean. Don't you suppose I'd have in-

vented a better story than this one? I would have said she'd gone to Canada or Mexico or New South Wales, some place where you couldn't find her."

He pondered that. It was an effort, the size of his brain being what it was, but the logic managed to penetrate. "Yeah," he said. "Yeah."

I waited while he did some more thinking.

"All right, Parigli," he said at length. "You got a pretty good rep in this town, so I figure you're telling the truth. You found the Guthrie dame once. You think you can find her again?"

"I can find her."

"I want you should leave today," Fat Gus said. "We can't waste no time."

"Right away," I said. I studied my nails. "As soon as we settle a small matter."

"What matter?"

"My fee."

"What the hell you mean, your fee? I already give you the fifteen hundred you asked for."

"That was for finding her the first time," I said. "As soon as I accomplished that, our contract was terminated. Services rendered, services paid."

His eyes narrowed. "You ain't trying to shake me down?"

"Why, Gus, I'm surprised at you.

This is a business proposition. You're simply going to have to re-hire me. It's my policy." I paused. "I *do* have to make a living, too, you know."

He chewed a pinky the size of a garlic sausage and scowled. Then he said, "Okay, Parigli. I don't like it, but I'll give you another fifteen hundred. But I'm warning you, you better find her this time, and make sure she stays found. You understand?"

"Completely."

He waved a huge red hand, dismissing me. I stood up. The big gray cat on his desk eyed me balefully, and meowed.

Fat Gus looked at the cat, and then over to where Waldo stood by the closed office door. "Waldo, get Maximilian some milk. He's hungry."

"Yeah, boss," Waldo said. It was the first thing I'd heard him say; I hadn't even known he was capable of speech. He went to a mahogany-and-leather bar at one end of the office and took a bottle of milk from the cooler. He poured some in a saucer, brought it over and set it down on the desk. Maximilian yawned, sniffed, then began to lap up the milk.

"Nice kitty," Waldo said, patting Maximilian's head.

"Nice kitty," Fat Gus said, patting Maximilian's rump.



I went to the door. The angular man, whose name was Al, looked at me with a long-suffering expression and rolled his eyes. I nodded sympathetically.

Outside, I flagged a cab and went back to my apartment. I took a quick shower, changed clothes, and picked up my car. Then I headed north.

I arrived in Darby Falls, a small fishing village a few miles from the Oregon border, shortly past nine that evening. I went directly to the Buckingham Hotel.

The desk clerk was a thin man I didn't know. I asked him where I could locate Ralph, the day man. The clerk said he had relieved Ralph an hour earlier, and I could probably find him in the hotel lounge.

I found him there, nursing a Manhattan. I sat down beside him, and ordered a bourbon-and-water. "Hello, Ralph," I said.

He turned, small eyes squinting. "Oh, it's you," he said.

"In the flesh."

He gave me a grin. "You was right," he said. "Two fellows was here last night, looking for the babe. I told them what you said for me to say. Did I do okay?"

"You did fine," I said. I took a twenty out of my wallet and placed it on the bar between us. "She checked out, I imagine?"

He touched Grant's picture with the tip of his forefinger. "Sure did," he answered. "About a half-hour after you left."

"Did you find out where she went?"

"I asked her for a forwarding address, but she wasn't saying. She asked me to call her a cab, though."

"Any idea where the cab took her?"

"Sure. I know the driver, Ed Conway, who picked her up. I asked him first thing this morning."

"And?"

"He took her to Preston."

"Where's that?"

"About ten miles southeast of here."

"What address in Preston?"

"No address," Ralph said. "The train station there. We ain't got one, you know."

"Okay, Ralph, you've earned the twenty."

He folded it carefully and tucked it into his shirt pocket. "Say," he said, "I don't want to be nosy, but what's the deal with the babe? I mean, what's it all about?"

"Don't be," I said.

"Huh?"

"Nosy," I said, and left him to his Manhattan.

It was late, but I decided to drive to Preston anyway. She'd gotten there between six and seven

last night; night shifts being what they are, the ticket seller would more than likely be the same one.

I followed a county highway badly in need of repair to Preston. The train station was a single wooden building on the outskirts of town. I parked in the lot in front and went inside.

The ticket seller was a kid about twenty with a Durante nose, a Beatle haircut, and a Bogart sneer. "Yeah?" he said when I came up to the window.

"Were you on duty between six and seven last night?"

He curled his lip. "Who wants to know?"

"Lauren Bacall," I said.

He didn't get that. "Who?"

I took Bobbie Jean Guthrie's picture from my pocket and spread it on the counter in front of him. "You sell a ticket to this woman between six and seven last night?"

He looked at the picture. I saw recognition come into his eyes, and then a crafty look. He wet his lips. "Never seen her before," he said, sneering.

He thought he saw a quick buck. I sneered back at him. "So you never saw her before."

"That's right, mac."

"I hope for your sake you're not lying to me, sonny."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"The Big Boy doesn't like people

who lie," I said. "He gets upset. And when he gets upset . . ." I left it there, watching him.

The sneer faded a bit. "The Big Boy?"

"The Big Boy," I said. "I remember the time Frank the Fixer got caught lying to the Big Boy." I told him what had happened to Frank the Fixer, who didn't even exist as far as I knew.

He got green around the ears. "Listen," he said, a little weakly, "you don't expect me to believe all that?"

"Believe what you want," I said and leaned forward, letting my coat dip open so he could see the gun I wore in my belt holster.

He got greener. "Hey," he said. "Hey, I . . ."

I shrugged. "I just hope you ain't lying, sonny."

"I . . . I just remembered," he said quickly. "Yeah, yeah, it comes back to me now. She was the one got out of the Darby Falls cab. Tall blonde. Sure, I remember now."

"You're doing fine," I said. "Did she buy a ticket?"

"Sure, sure. To Portland. She left on the eight o'clock Limited."

"Was she carrying any luggage?"

"A suitcase and a brown traveling bag."

"What time does the next Portland train leave?"

"Midnight," he said.

"I'll take a round trip."

"Sure, a round trip. Sure thing."

He was anxious to please, now. He gave me the tickets. I patted him on the head, and went to the door.

"Hey, mister," he called after me. "Listen, don't tell the . . . Big Boy, will you? I mean, I wasn't lying. *Honest*. I just forgot."

"I wasn't even here tonight," I said.

He swallowed. "Thanks, mister. Thanks."

I went outside, found a restaurant open several blocks from the train station and had something to eat. Then I put in a collect call to Fat Gus in San Francisco and told him what I had found out.

"Portland? That's a big city, Parigi. You think you can find her there?"

"There are ways," I said. "It might take a couple of days, but I'll find her."

"Okay, but just remember, don't foul up this time."

"Gus, have you no faith?"

"Not when I got fifty thousand dollars at stake, I ain't."

"Don't worry. And tell Maximilian I said hello."

I took the midnight train to Portland, then checked into a downtown hotel and slept till eleven the next morning. Then I called an operative I knew there

named Spivey, and told him what I was working on. Since I had done him a favor a year or so ago, he agreed to cooperate. He dropped by later and I gave him Bobbie Jean Guthrie's picture, and a promise of a hundred dollars for his trouble.

It took Spivey four days to find Bobbie Jean for me.

I was reading the afternoon papers in my hotel room when he called. "She's at the El Primo Motor Court on Skirvin Drive, apartment six." He told me how to get there.

I thanked him, told him I would have a check in the mail later in the week, and rang off. I took a city bus to the El Primo Motor Court.

It was a sprawling wood-and-stucco affair of quasi-Spanish architecture. I found apartment six and knocked on the door.

There was no answer.

I looked at the lock, wondered if any sneak thieves knew about this paradise, and picked it in thirty seconds. The apartment was empty. I looked in the closet. There was the single suitcase the kid in Preston had said she was carrying, but there was no sign of the traveling bag. Apparently, she wasn't taking any chances with the money.

I lit a cigarette and sat down in

one of the lounge chairs to wait.

I heard her key in the lock twenty minutes later. She came inside, carrying the traveling bag. When she saw me, her eyes grew wide and she started to back out again.

By that time I had reached the door. I grabbed her wrist, turned her around and sat her down on the bed. I took the traveling bag from her hand, went over and shut the door. Then I turned, facing her.

"Hello, Bobbie Jean," I said.

She was about twenty-three, tall and slender, and her light blonde hair was badly in need of retouching. She had a nice face, with wide, innocent-looking brown eyes. I read a mixture of fright and resignation in them as she sat staring up at me.

"You're the man from Darby Falls," she said.

"Uh huh." I smiled at her.

"What do you want?"

"I should think that would be obvious."

"Fat Gus?"

"Fat Gus."

She wet her pink lips and sighed deeply. "I shouldn't have taken the money," she said.

"No, you shouldn't have."

"It was so easy," she said softly. "Being his secretary, I had access to his desk. I was looking for some papers one day when I came across

a notebook. It had the combination to the safe written in it."

"Very careless of Fat Gus," I said.

"One night, after he'd gone, I opened the safe. When I saw all that money in there, I guess I lost my head. I put it all in a manila folder and went straight from *The Poor Richard* to the bus depot. I thought I could get far enough away so that Fat Gus would never find me."

"Why did you go to a place like Darby Falls, may I ask?"

"It seemed like a good idea," Bobbie Jean said. "I thought Gus would be expecting me to go to one of the big cities. A small town seemed like a better place to hide for a while."

"It took me all of two days to find you," I said. "You left a rather easy trail to follow."

She shrugged philosophically. "I'm not very good at this sort of thing, I guess." She looked up at me. "Are you a private detective?"

"Now how did you know that?"

"I don't know. You *look* like a private detective, I suppose. Besides, I know all of Fat Gus' men." A small smile touched her mouth. "You're rather obvious, did you realize?"

"Am I?"

"I saw you skulking around the hotel in Darby Falls. You were watching me while I ate lunch, and

you followed me when I walked down to the drugstore. It was almost as if you *wanted* me to notice you."

"Now why would I want you to notice me?"

"I don't have any idea," Bobbie Jean said: "Did you?"

"Of course not," I said.

"Why didn't you approach me then?"

I smiled. "Business matter," I said.

"Well, it doesn't make any difference, anyway. You've found me again."

"That I have."

"What happens now?" she asked.

"Do you turn me over to Fat Gus?"

"Why would I do a thing like that? All Fat Gus wants is his money back."

"You're not fooling me any," Bobbie Jean said. "I worked for him long enough to know how he thinks. He wants my blood."

I shook my head sadly. "You have an active imagination."

"You're not going to turn me over to Fat Gus?"

"No."

"You mean you're going to let me go?"

"I don't see why not," I said. "But I would advise against returning to San Francisco."

"I don't understand all this."

"Bobbie Jean," I said, "do not

look a gift horse in the mouth, to coin a phrase."

"All right," she said, "but I still don't . . ."

I cleared my throat pointedly. "Where are you from?" I asked. "Originally, I mean?"

"Sioux Falls, South Dakota."

"Family there?"

"Yes."

"If you want my advice," I said, "go back to Sioux Falls, take a secretarial job in a nice office somewhere, and keep your hands out of the boss' desk. Do you understand?"

"I understand."

"Fine." I zippered the brown traveling bag open and looked inside. "Is all the money here?"

"All but about two hundred dollars," Bobbie Jean said. "I spent that."

I took three one hundred dollar bills from the bag and put them on the bed beside her. "That should be enough for plane fare back to Sioux Falls," I said.

Her mouth opened, then closed. There was utter bewilderment on her face.

I closed the bag, tucked it under my arm, and went to the door. I turned there and smiled at her. "Give my regards to the folks at home," I said, and left her sitting there on the bed with her mouth still hinged open.

I took a cab directly to the train station, caught the five o'clock back to Darby Falls, picked up my car there, had a fast supper, and drove straight through to San Francisco.

I found Fat Gus in his office at *The Poor Richard*. His suit was mauve this time. Al was there, looking bored as usual. There was no sign of Waldo or Maximilian.

I plopped the traveling bag down in front of Fat Gus.

Surprise registered on his moon face. "What's that?"

"Your money," I said.

It took him awhile. He blinked twice and scratched his nose. Then he got it. "My fifty grand?"

"Not quite," I said. "Forty thousand, give or take a hundred."

"What happened to the other ten grand?"

"Bobbie Jean got it."

"Where the hell is *she*?"

"In Europe, by this time."

"*Europe?*" Fat Gus exploded.

"Listen, Parigli, you better do some fast explaining."

"I found Bobbie Jean in Portland easily enough, through an operative I know up there. I went to where she was staying myself, to make sure she was still there."

"Yeah?"

"But she'd already gone. In a large hurry. She must have found out some way that we were on to her. She didn't have time to pack

all her things together, and when I searched what she left behind I found a key to a locker at the bus depot. She'd forgotten it in her rush to get away. When I went down there and opened the locker, I found this bag with the forty thousand inside. She apparently had the other ten thousand on her."

"Okay, but what about *her*?"

"I'm getting to that," I said. "I had my operative friend do some more checking. He learned that she caught a flight out of Portland that same afternoon. A transcontinental flight, destination London."

"London, *England?*"

"That's the one," I said.

He slammed his fist down on the desk. "Damn you, Parigli!" he barked. "She got away with ten grand of my money!"

"If you want," I said, "I'll take a plane over there and try to find her again. I won't guarantee anything. Europe is a big place. But I can try."

Fat Gus stared at me, nodding slowly. "Yeah," he said. "You'll take a plane over there, all right, if I rehire you again, and pay all your expenses. Ain't that right, Parigli?"

"Not at all," I said. "This is the second time she's gotten away from me, so I'll go to Europe on my own money and look for her. After all, I've got a reputation to keep

up besides keeping you happy."

He hadn't expected that. "You'd do that?" he asked, puzzled.

"It's the least I can do," I said.

There was a hint of what might have been grudging admiration in his eyes. "That's damn square of you, Parigli. I figured you wrong. I had you pegged for an angle man."

I managed to look indignant.

Fat Gus chewed his lip thoughtfully. "Actual," he said, "you done pretty good by me so far. You brought back my forty grand. Hell, you could of said the Guthrie chick got away with all of it, and kept the caboodle for yourself."

"Gus," I said, "you wound me deeply."

-I *could* have gotten away with the entire forty-nine thousand, five hundred, of course. But greed, you know, has led to the downfall of many an individual—and I'm not a greedy man.

Besides, I like the simple pleasures in life. I wouldn't know how to spend forty-nine thousand, five hundred dollars.

Of course, I have always wanted

to take a European vacation, and—after some quick mental calculating: fifteen hundred for the first time I found Bobbie Jean Guthrie, fifteen hundred for the second time, nine thousand, five hundred from the traveling bag—twelve thousand, five hundred dollars is more than enough for a man to enjoy himself comfortably abroad. They say the Riviera is nice this time of year.

I realized Fat Gus was speaking. "You know, Parigli, I kind of like you. Maybe, after you get back, we could do some business again. I could use a man like you now and then."

I forced a straight face. "I certainly hope so."

"Yeah," Fat Gus said. "You're okay. Most of them private eyes is bums. But not you. You know what it is you got that them other bums don't have?"

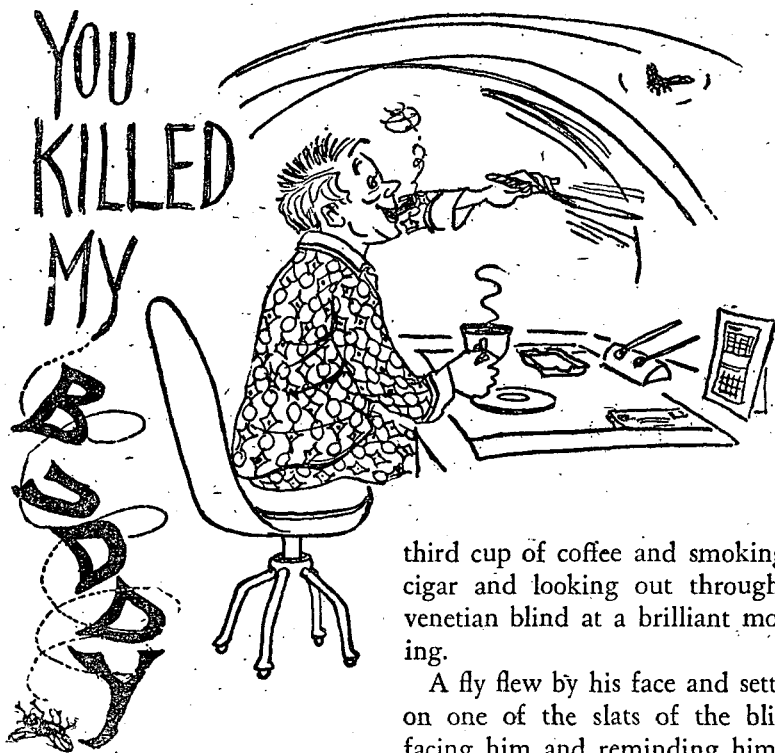
"What's that?" I asked.

"Ethics," Fat Gus said. "You can't hardly find no man what's got ethics these days."

I had to smile then. "Ain't it the truth?" I said.



There are some murder cases that would make the prosecutor a laughingstock when it comes to presentation of the deadly weapon.



third cup of coffee and smoking a cigar and looking out through a venetian blind at a brilliant morning.

A fly flew by his face and settled on one of the slats of the blind, facing him and reminding him of the way an Air Force swept-wing fighter looks on the ground.

Picking up a letter opener, he tapped the slat the fly was on, and the fly took off, climbing and diving between the blind and the glass. He put the opener down and gazed at a calendar on the desk.

HE HAD awakened feeling fine, had gotten out of bed easily and quietly so as not to disturb his wife and gone to the kitchen to fix coffee. Now he was at the desk in the room of the house that served as an at-home office, drinking his

As he did, the fly settled on the blotter between him and the calendar and worked its wings and bent its legs, seeming to dare him to take another swat at it.

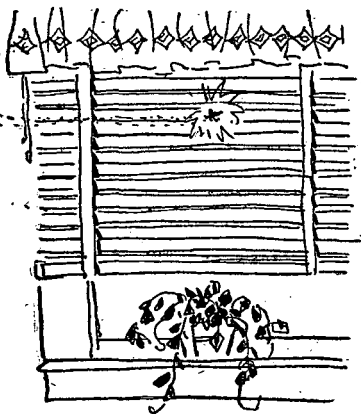
He picked up the opener again and swung lightly at the fly, not intending to kill it, but it was gone before the opener ever came close, flying up and out into the room. The slow and lazy way it flew seemed to express a knowledge that it was just a pleasant game they were playing. He smiled at the fly, the way he would smile at a pup or a kitten.

The fly went out of sight some-

where in the room and he smoked and looked out the window again. Then the fly was back, alighting on one of the slats. Again he picked up the opener and tapped the slat, and the fly rose and went through its routine of climbs and dives, acting like a pet feigning fear of a master.

The man and the fly kept up the game for ten or fifteen minutes, until he heard the door open. His wife came in and said, "What on earth is causing all the racket back here?"

"I'm having a game with a fly," he said, and he tapped a slat of the



blind again and the fly went into its crazy-happy flying exhibition.

His wife left, and he didn't know she was back until he heard a hiss behind him and turned to see her training the jet of a can of insecticide on the fly. It remained aloft

for a moment, but the pattern became wilder and wilder, and finally the fly fell on the sill of the window and lay there on its back with its legs working.

His wife scraped it off with the edge of the insecticide can and stepped on it. She went to the bathroom and came back with a piece of tissue and rubbed the spot on the floor.

He looked at her, the cigar in his fingers, and said, "You killed my little buddy."

"I wonder how that thing got in here," she said. "It's the first one we've had in a long time."

"I tell you, you killed my little buddy," he said, and his eyes were narrow and cold.

"Is this another one of your silly jokes? You know flies are dirty and carry germs."

"That fly was not hurting a living damn soul. He and I were having a game and he was enjoying it and so was I, and then you come in and kill him."

"Oh, shut up," she said, and started to leave.

He got up from his chair and followed her. "You'd never let us have a dog or a cat," he said. "No, they're too *dirty*, or they're too much *trouble*, or they're a *nuisance*. And now I finally get a little fly for a friend, and what do you do? You murder it. I think you'd like

to murder anything that has any sweetness or innocence."

She stopped and looked at him. "You're *not* kidding, are you?"

He looked her in the eyes for a moment, then looked down at the cigar between his fingers and said, "I don't know whether I am or not. You can't stand bugs, can you?"

"No, I can't," she said. "That's why I never wanted us to have a dog or a cat. They carry fleas."

"They stay on the animal."

"Sometimes they don't. Sometimes they get off and get in the rugs and furniture."

"What would you do if I came home with lice?"

She shuddered and said, "Oh, don't be silly."

"No, I mean it. Just suppose I came home from war with body lice and you hadn't seen me for two years. What would you do?"

"Oh, don't be ridiculous," she said, and turned to leave.

"I know what you'd do. You'd call the city health department and have someone come out and take me to headquarters and give me a bath and cut my hair and spray me. Then, when I got a cleanliness certificate, *then* you might let me come home. The hero, having to have all that done before he could come in his own house. Then I would probably have to wait ten

days or two weeks before you'd kiss me, to see if they got all the bugs."

"You're revolting."

"But isn't that what you'd do? Huh?"

She was mad now. She had her hands on her hips and her eyes were flashing. "You're right, that's what I would do. And that's not all I would do. I would make you go back for an inspection every week, and if so much as one louse turned up on you, I'd divorce you."

He was pleased at her outburst. Very contentedly he took a long puff on his cigar and said, "Did I ever tell you about the time I got caught in a nest of bedbugs? It was years ago. I was traveling with my father, and we had to spend the night in this small-town hotel. . ."

She hurried out of the room and slammed the door.

He looked down at the spot on the floor where she had mashed the fly and said, "I got even for you a little bit, chum. Rest in partial peace."

He sat for a long time, smoking and looking out the window, feeling good over the way he had ended the exchange with his wife. Suddenly his appearance changed. He leaned forward in his chair, his posture tense, and his eyes

sharper and more alert. "Why not?" he said to himself.

That afternoon he told his wife he had to go to the office for a while, and left the house. Instead of going to the office, however, he went to three pet shops. The first two didn't have what he wanted, but the third one did, and he told the clerk, "Let me have two, please."

The clerk said, "Yes, indeed. You'll enjoy these, sir. They're very entertaining, even educational."

"I'm sure I will," he said, and paid and started to leave. Near the door, there was a cage with a puppy in it. He stopped and squatted down to look at it. The pup wagged its tail, lurched up to the bars of the cage and put its nose through. The man scratched it and then patted its head.

The clerk had come up and was watching, and the man asked him, "What kind of a dog is this?"

"That's a little bit of everything, sir. The only reason we have him is that I picked him up one night on the way home. I think somebody had put him out of a car, and he was obviously going to get killed if he didn't get some care. My wife wouldn't let me keep him—we have four dogs now, and five cats—so I brought him down here, cleaned him up and put him in

this cage. Sometimes kids will come in here looking for a pet, and he would make a good one."

"How much do you want for him?"

"Well, the asking price is five dollars, but I'll negotiate."

"I'll buy him for that. But I can't take him home today. Let's see, today's Saturday . . . I'll tell you what—I'll pay you for him now and pick him up Monday. Would that be all right?"

"That would be fine, sir."

When he got home, he drove into the garage and put the package from the pet shop in the closet in the garage.

When he went inside the house, his wife said, "Would it be all right with you if we had dinner a little early tonight? Nell Fox called and said the bridge game we had scheduled would have to start early because they're leaving town tomorrow."

"Sure, that's fine with me."

She came up to him, kissed him and said, "I'm sorry about this morning, but I can't help it about insects and bugs. And then I've been nervous ever since the doctor told me . . ."

"You taking the medicine he gave you? And carrying the glycerine tablets with you?"

"Yes."

"Well, don't worry about it. A

lot of people with angina live long and happy lives."

They had dinner and she cleaned off the table and dressed. When she was ready to leave she said, "Are you going out?"

"I don't think so."

"Well, I'll be back at ten o'clock."

"You should, you know. The doctor told you to get lots of rest."

"I will, honey. Goodbye."

After she had gone, he looked at his watch and saw that it was six-thirty. He went into the bedroom and set the alarm clock for nine-thirty, then lay down and very quickly went to sleep.

The alarm woke him at nine-thirty. He went to the bathroom and washed his face in cold water. After he dried it, he gazed in the mirror and thought he looked more relaxed and happy than he had in a long time. He smiled at himself and held up his right hand, forming a circle with his thumb and forefinger. He went to the kitchen and put a pan of water on for coffee, then to the closet in the garage for the package he had put there earlier.

He brought it back in the house with him and put it on a table in the kitchen. He made a cup of instant coffee, took two sips, looked at his watch again and saw that it was nine-forty. He took a teaspoon of sugar to the bedroom, pulled

down the covers and sprinkled the sugar on the sheet.

Back in the kitchen, he unwrapped the package, took one of the containers into the bedroom and opened it over the sugar. Then he pulled the covers back up and smoothed them so the bed looked undisturbed.

The other container he took into the front room and put it under a pillow on the sofa without opening it, then sat down in a chair and picked up a book.

His wife returned shortly and he said, "Hello," looked at his watch and added, "You're right on time."

"Doctor's orders," she said.

"How was the game?"

"Good. I was getting good cards and so was Nell, and we took them good." She came over to him, bent down and kissed him. "Heard a little gossip, too, but it will have to wait until tomorrow. I'm going to bed. Night, honey."

"Good night, honey."

She went into the bedroom and he heard her hanging her clothes in the closet. Then she went to the bathroom and he heard the water running in the tub.

After she had bathed, she put her head in the livingroom and said, "Good night again. See you in the morning."

"Good night, hon."

When he heard the door of the

bedroom close, he got up very quietly; retrieved the container he had put under the cushion on the sofa and quickly took it into the bathroom. He put the stopper in the bottom of the bathtub and then opened the container over the tub.

As he was leaving the bathroom, he heard the light being turned off by his wife in the bedroom, and then the sound of the bed as she got into it.

He went back into the front room and sat down. He heard sudden loud movements in the bedroom and then the first scream.

He got up from his chair, went to the door of the livingroom that led into the bedroom and bathroom area, and stood there waiting. He heard two more screams, a thump, and the sound of ripping cloth. Then the door to the bedroom was pulled violently open and his wife ran out, her face a mask of horror. She ran, stumbling and screaming, to the bathroom, tearing at her nightgown as she went.

"What's the matter?" he asked.

She didn't answer. She slammed the bathroom door and then there was a shriek louder than ever, and she said, "Oh, heaven help me."

He opened the door and went in. She was standing naked in a corner of the bathroom with her

hands up over her face, alternately sobbing and screaming. When he asked her the question again, she took one hand from her face and, without opening her eyes, pointed in the direction of the bathtub.

She slumped to the floor and the sobbing changed to a gasping for breath. She looked up at him out of wide, crazed eyes and said, "My pills. The glycerine," then closed her eyes again and began to fight for her breath.

He leaned against the wall and looked at her, a pleasant smile on his face.

Again she opened her eyes and said, "The pills—I can't get my breath."

While she watched him, he went to the bathtub and reached down. Then he came over to her, held out his hand and said, "Is this all that's bothering you?"

She looked at the ant that was crawling around in the palm of his hand and started screaming once more.

"Why, this little thing won't hurt you, hon," he said, and he put the

ant on her knee. He smiled again.

She brushed at the ant in a frenzy, and started writhing and pushing up against the wall, trying to get away.

Suddenly she stopped and looked at him with eyes that were filled with horror. She choked out the word "You," and then the life went out of her forever and gently she slumped into the corner.

The funeral was on Monday. When it was over, he went straight to the pet shop and told the clerk, "Well, I've come for my dog. Has he been good?"

"Oh, he's a fine pup, sir. You're going to enjoy this dog. By the way, how did the ant colonies work out?"

The man was holding his new pet, stroking its head and smiling at it. "I liked the ants very much. You know, I never knew that ants were such efficient little things. It's amazing what they can do."

"That's what all of our customers have told us."

"Is that right?" And he smiled at the clerk.



Progress has been considered not to be an accident; however, many mishaps occur on purpose.



I CAME upon Julie Hazelton soon after the ship sailed from New York for France. She was lounging in a chair on the Boat Deck, her eyes closed, an open book in her lap. Even beneath the heartless scrutiny of the noonday sun she was a startling attraction, and for a moment I stood awkwardly beside her chair, nervous as a diver about to take his first plunge from the high board.

By Robert Colby

In a second or two she felt my presence. Her stainless gray-blue eyes widened slowly and came to focus.

"Call!" she said. "Cal Reese!" Her soft voice caressed my name and

made it sound passionately important. "Cal—I just don't believe it!"

I grinned and held my hand toward her. "Touch it," I said. "It's real."

She took my hand and squeezed, her fingers pulsing warm and urgent against my palm. I settled into a chair beside her and lighted her cigarette.

"How perfectly marvelous!" she exclaimed, smoke trailing from dainty nostrils. "What a delightful coincidence."

"Julie," I confessed, "it's not entirely a coincidence. I was planning a vacation, yes, but nothing so extravagant as a trip to Europe, first class. Then I read an item in the newspaper: 'Julie Hazelton, widow of the late Wall Street millionaire, Malcolm Hazelton, sailing for France on June third . . .' Well, I couldn't resist the temptation. It was a wild impulse."

I watched her face for a sign of rebuke, but she was smiling and nodding happily, her expression telling me that she was pleased and excited. A few years back we had been in love and during those brief times between her three marriages the affair had continued, almost as if without interruption.

She frankly admitted that from a strictly romantic point of view, I was her first and last choice, but she couldn't overcome her mental

block against marrying the sales manager of a chemical manufacturing company who made a mere twenty-five thousand a year. "Not that I love you less, Cal," she might have said, "but only that I love money more."

This last is something of an exaggeration. Julie came from a poor family and was brought up in the most wretched poverty. In the formative years of her life she developed a compulsive need to have and to be—to have riches and to be "somebody," even if it were only *Mrs. Somebody*. Her distorted sense of values, her warped concepts, goaded her on. She married three men for their money, each progressively more affluent than the other.

Julie was not the victim of insatiable greed, but rather the victim of her fear of poverty. Knowing what drove her, I forgave her. Still, I was never the sort to hover meekly in the background waiting for my day. As time passed, however, I couldn't find anyone who came close to being her replacement. Further, Julie had made me a fantastic promise: "Before I reach thirty, I'm going to have a million dollars to call my own, and then I'm going to marry you. Wait for me, Cal—you won't be sorry."

Julie was intensely sincere, and a person of such determination that

she never gave up until she had what she wanted. I knew she couldn't make a million, she would have to marry it, but no man was going to part with a million and turn her loose to marry me. It was an impossible dream. Yet now she was twenty-nine, detached, and in possession of not one, but two millions.

Her first husband, Milton Shockley, owned a small chain of liquor stores. It turned out that he was mortgaged up to here and gone and was far from a millionaire. Number two was Charles Shoemaker, vice-president of a meat packing firm. He lived and acted like a millionaire but behind his big splash there was never more than a couple of hundred thousand cash to back him up.

The third was the aforementioned Malcolm Hazelton, a Wall Street mogul who was the genuine article and who could liquidate a million or so in stocks and bonds any day of the week. Julie had begun modestly, if not naively, with Milton Shockley and his limping liquor stores, reaching her target with Malcolm Hazelton and his shrewd speculations in the market.

I don't know how she'd expected to wring a million of her own out of these three partnerships, but it never became a problem. All three men died violently soon after she married them. Milton Shockley was

killed in a hunting accident—a stray bullet in search of a deer found him instead. Charles Shoemaker expired in a hit-run accident. Malcolm Hazelton toppled from his nineteenth floor terrace after belting a few too many at a cocktail party.

"Disaster seems to follow me in every marriage," Julie had told me sadly with a long sigh of despair. "It's almost as if I were being punished for seeking money instead of love."

Although I didn't voice my opinion, it appeared to me that losing these unwanted husbands and gaining their dough was hardly punishment. Wasn't it a kind of grim blessing?

I had called Julie soon after the demise of Malcolm Hazelton to offer my sympathy, thinking at the time how much more honest it would be to offer my congratulations. Julie said she had been "fond" of Malcolm and was deeply depressed. More, the accidental death of yet a third spouse had left her with an unshakable sense of guilt. I couldn't convince her that it was merely an unhappy coincidence, that no mysterious and destructive force of evil had followed her from marriage to marriage—a ridiculous superstition, I had told her.

Julie had inherited a cozy nest

egg of two millions, more or less, and now she was free—free of her compulsion, and free to keep her promise to marry me. Naturally, I was just a bit eager. It had been a long wait and the addition of all that cash had done nothing to dampen my enthusiasm.

Yet while Julie assured me that her feelings had never changed toward me and that she was anxious to keep her promise, she had declared that she would not be in any frame of mind to marry again until there had been time to recover from shock and grief. "Darling, don't be a cynic. Of course I feel for Malcolm! Am I inhuman? Even the death of a little dog in the street makes me weep . . ."

Also, since the police were too skeptical and practical to accept easily the coincidence of accidental death when it struck three husbands in a row, they were snooping about unmercifully and seemed in no danger of fatigue. The police could not know as I did that despite Julie's neurotic quest for the security of wealth, she was too sweet and gentle to be capable of violence.

In any case, she had told me that she did not want to marry me under the stigma of the smallest suspicion, however absurd. Therefore, it was necessary for us to remain entirely separate for the present.

She would not even allow me to phone her, insisting that she would get in touch when she was ready, and not a moment before.

She was overly defensive and I found her attitude rather strange. Too, there were rumors that she was often seen with the notorious Gordon Cleary. I had no choice but to play it her way. Then, when she had not called or written in nearly three months, it was too much. I had to phone her. A maid said she was out of town, did not know where she was or when she would return. I called again in a few days but got another brush from an English butler, delivered in that infuriatingly polite and cool British accent which hints that you are an unspeakable cad for daring to attempt communication with royalty.

A couple of weeks later I read the item in the newspaper and made up my mind. I was going to sail on the same ship to force the issue, one way or another.

Now, as we sat close in deck chairs, I asked pointedly, "Why have you avoided me all this time, Julie? Not a word, and then you sneak off to Europe."

She gave me a quick, sidelong glance, then peered out to sea. "You want the truth, Cal?"

"Unless you know something better."

"Well, I had decided not to mar-

ry you, not to see you again."

"Oh? A million or two didn't cure the disease, so you found another moneybags."

"Nonsense, Cal. But I can't really blame you a bit for assuming the worst. No, I have all the money I'll ever need or want. And I still love you—madly! But I'm afraid to marry you."

"Why?"

She frowned and poked at her dark, wind-fluffed hair. "Because I don't want to lose you."

"Baby, make sense, will you?"

She said, "I'm not willing to risk your life. You could be the fourth—the fourth fatal accident."

"Is that all!" I laughed with relief.

"I've been thinking about it a long time," she continued solemnly. "I married three men and each died a few months later in horrible accidents. Why should you be the exception?"

I tried to come up with a decent answer. It wasn't easy. "You're reasoning like a female," I argued, "with your emotions. Your brain should tell you that you're not a witch on a broom who can never marry without bringing sudden death to your mates. That's a childish superstition."

"Yes, but—"

"It all springs from a guilty conscience. You married these men for

their money and so you imagine that nothing could come of it but disaster. Were you planning to marry *me* for my money?"

She chuckled. "How silly, darling."

"Then forget it. When the heart is pure and you marry for love, no harm can come. I'll be perfectly safe."

She smiled. "How I wish I could believe that."

"Listen, Julie, I'll be on guard every minute, for your sake. But even if we had only six months or a year together, it would be worth more to me than a lifetime apart."

She took my hand and squeezed. "I believe you really mean it."

"I do."

"Then I'll think about it again. Just give me a little more time."

"How long? Weeks? Months?"

"No," she said decisively, "I'll give you an answer in the morning . . ."

At Julie's request, I left her alone to ponder. That evening, feeling restless and edgy, I went to the lounge on the main deck for a drink. Entering, I spied Julie seated at a table with a man who looked vaguely familiar. Concealing my anger behind a poker face, I sauntered over.

Julie's expression when she looked up was smiling, innocent. "Cal, how nice!" she said. "I'm

glad you're here because I want you to meet a very old friend—Gordon Cleary."

I recognized the name at once and I had seen the face a few times in the newspapers and on TV, when Gordon Cleary was under senate investigation. He was an arrogantly handsome, middle-aged multimillionaire, reputedly a front-man who controlled half a dozen legitimate enterprises into which syndicate money was fed.

"Glad to meet you, Gordon," I lied casually. He gave me a curt nod and showed me his teeth without smiling. The ship rolled and I leaned against the table for support.

"Mind if I join you?" I said to Julie.

"Not at all," she replied sweetly.

"She doesn't mind, but *I* do," said Cleary. "Maybe later, huh? Meanwhile, have one on me—at the bar."

"You're a real sport," I grinned. "So jump over and swim ashore!"

I sat down abruptly. Then I offered Cleary a fine view of my profile and spoke directly to Julie. She tried tactfully to weave him into the conversation but he barely grunted. After a while he got up without a word and left.

"You were terribly rude," Julie scolded. "You could've made some effort to warm him up a little. He

was obviously jealous and had nothing against you personally."

"He has now," I said.

"He's enormously wealthy and powerful," she went on. "It's foolish to make an enemy of such a man."

"How enormously wealthy is he, Julie?"

"Who counts when you have that much?"

"He's a crook. A legal crook on a big scale."

"Don't believe everything you read," she snapped. "He has a few underworld connections, that's all."

"He *is* the underworld," I countered. "And how come he just happened to be on this ship?"

"How come *you* just happened to be on this ship?" Her mouth twisted into a scornful smile.

"That's different."

"Is it? Well, he was much more direct than you were. He called to say he had intended to fly to Europe but would take this ship to be near me if I didn't object."

"And what was your answer to that one?"

"I told him it wasn't a private yacht and I didn't see any way that I could stop him."

"You might as well have sent him an engraved invitation. If he has so much loot, why didn't you marry him long ago?"

"Because he was already married.

He recently got a divorce, you see."

"And now the road is clear in both directions—hmm?"

"Open highway, darling."

"That's all I want to know, Julie." I stood.

"Wait!" She grabbed my sleeve. "I was only needling you."

I sat down. "Prove it," I challenged. "Marry me tonight. We'll go see the captain."

Her face became grave. "I'm still thinking, remember? About *your* safety. I have no other reason to hold back."

I knew it was going to be all right then. We had a couple of drinks and I left her at her cabin door. In the passageway I met Gordon Cleary.

"If I were you," he snarled softly, "I'd stay away from Julie. You might die of a broken heart—or head."

"It's a long swim," I suggested, "but if you hurry you might still be able to make it to shore."

The next evening Julie and I were married by the captain. I moved into her much more spacious and luxurious cabin in the same hour. We remained there during most of the voyage, deliriously happy to be alone for the first leg of our impromptu honeymoon.

On the last night at sea we dressed in formal garb to attend the Captain's Ball. I was ready

much before Julie and went to the bar for a drink. I had hardly taken the first swallow when Gordon Cleary appeared at my side.

"Congratulations, Reese," he said mockingly. "I do hope you'll be very happy together, though the record seems to indicate that you won't be with us long. Maybe you've noticed that all of Julie's husbands were doomed from the day they married her. They all died promptly in one frightful accident or another."

I said, "If that's a threat, thanks for the warning. I'll be expecting you. And if it's a confession, I know some people who would like to hear it, even secondhand. Now shove off!"

I watched him cross to a table where he sat in a huddle with two men, one of them a crew-cut college-boy type who had football shoulders and was one great hunk of muscle. Julie told me later that he was a combination bodyguard and all-around flunky for Cleary. The older man was a "business associate."

Julie was upset about the implied threat. To calm her I said Cleary was probably just blowing off steam. She wasn't persuaded. She was convinced that Cleary could be real trouble. Almost from the beginning he had been hopelessly in love with her and had been in hot

pursuit ever since, or so she said.

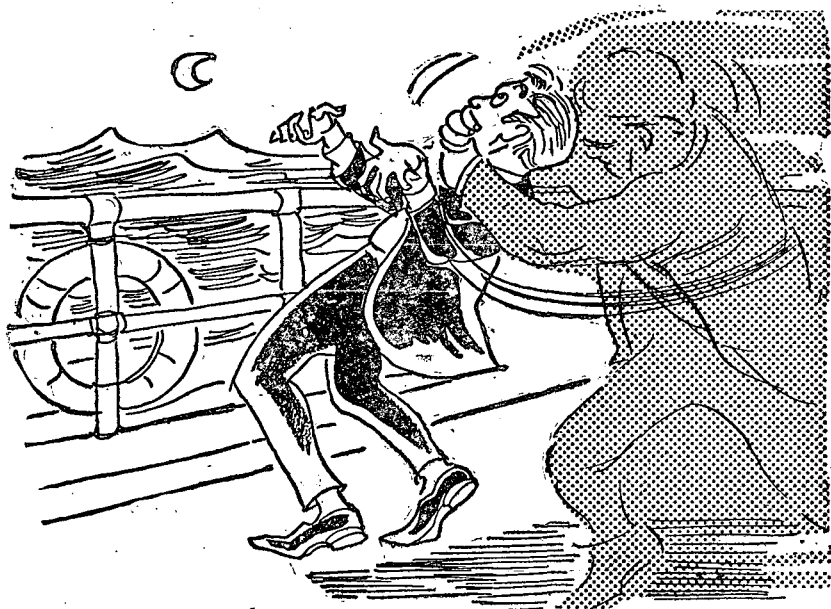
Near eleven o'clock that night, when the Captain's Ball was in high fever, Cleary came to our table and asked Julie to dance. Before I could fire a shot, she stood with a beaming smile and went off with him to the dance floor. Furious, I took a hike about the deck, pausing aft at the rail to light a cigarette.

At that moment someone came from behind and got a stranglehold around my neck. My lighter fell from my grasp and tumbled soundlessly into the churning wake below. I expected to be hurled after it in seconds. I was caught in a

vice of muscle, my windpipe was being crushed and I was fading fast.

Two boisterous couples appeared just then and I was suddenly released. When I had recovered they told me that my attacker was a youngish crew-cut type with weight-lifter's shoulders. His face had been in shadow and he had gone bounding off before anyone could identify him.

Julie was in tears. She had done no more than try to help, consenting to dance with Cleary so she could mollify him, get him alone to make peace for my benefit. Now she suspected that Gordon Cleary



had arranged the removal of her various husbands, that in fact the "accidents" had been cunningly engineered.

I was inclined to go along with her theory so we decided to take it up with the New York police when we returned home. Until then, with perhaps a dozen crew-cut young apes aboard, there was little chance of pointing a finger.

Keeping our plans secret, often changing our itinerary, we moved rapidly about Europe, alighting briefly at the Riviera, fleeing on to Rome, Copenhagen and London. It was a menacing, desperate sort of honeymoon and we cut it short to fly back to the States.

The police were sympathetic but cautious. They had no doubt that Gordon Cleary was capable of ordering "hits" for each of Julie's husbands. If they could find proof, they could nail a man who had too long escaped them with legal dodges and the smoke screen of respectability. They set out eagerly in search of evidence.

Meanwhile, Julie bought an estate in Connecticut and we settled down to a comparatively normal existence, softened by easy living and beautified by plush surroundings.

Probably Cleary had been warned that he was being investigated because there were no other

deadly incidents, no threats, no attempts on my life, designed to make Julie a four-time accidental widow.

In fact, Cleary's notorious career came to a halt just after we had celebrated our first anniversary. He was sent upriver to take a ten-year leave of absence while considering the consequences of failing to give Uncle Sam his full share of the take.

On the morning the news broke, Julie closed the paper with a deep sigh of relief. "Well," she said, "that does it. Now we can relax and enjoy the rest of our lives without fear. I'm only sorry they didn't convict him for his real crimes and execute him. But isn't that typical?"

"Typical," I said, and screened a yawn as the English butler, now my own defender against the crass annoyances of the outside world, poured second cups of coffee.

"Do you really think he did it?" Julie was thoughtful.

"Did what, sweetheart?"

"Ordered my husbands killed and made their deaths seem like accidents."

"Well, the police couldn't prove it, but they were convinced. And so am I."

"But how?" She bit daintily on a piece of toast. "I can't imagine how those phony accidents were arranged so cleverly, not leaving a

single trace. I've tried to figure it but I'm not very good at crime and the criminal mind. Now that I can think of it and discuss it for the first time without shuddering, I can't help wondering."

I smiled indulgently and said, "I guess it was mostly a matter of good timing. Cleary's hired killer was patient. He watched and waited for the precise moment when he could use a ready-made situation as a cover."

She nodded. "First there was the hunting trip with Milton—and that was the perfect opportunity."

"Sure," I said, "The killer goes into the woods behind you and Shockley. He's dressed like a hunter, I suppose, and it's natural for him to carry a gun. He hides behind a tree and 'bangs!'—it's all over. Then he vanishes. He even leaves *you* under suspicion, Julie, because there is no way for you to prove positively that *you* didn't kill Shockley."

Her eyes flicked up to mine and she made a nervous little sound that didn't quite come off as a laugh. "I wish you wouldn't kid about something so dreadful," she complained.

"But I wasn't kidding, Julie."

"Were you accusing, then?"

"Ridiculous, Julie! How could you think such a thing? No, I was merely trying to show you all the

angles the police might work with. As for the hit-run killing of your second—Charlie Shoemaker—anyone could steal a car, disguise himself with a few little gimmicks, smash the man to a pulp as he crossed the street, and race off."

Julie squeezed her eyes shut, swallowed. "And what about Malcolm? As I told you once before, he was loaded at the cocktail party and we had a fight. He left in a rage but in not much more than ten minutes I took a cab and chased after him. When I got there he had already fallen from the terrace—or was pushed. How? The front door was locked when I arrived."

"Simple. Cleary's boy must've had a key made. Or he was good with locks. It doesn't matter. Likely he knew his way around the building, he knew how to come and go and not be seen. He kept watch and waited until Hazelton was alone. Timing again."

She gazed across the table at me with admiration. "You have a logical answer for everything," she said. "Really, darling, you've got a brilliant mind."

I had to agree with her, though in truth, while there were a lot more complications than I could ever tell her without giving myself away, I had known the answers all along. I had worked out the basic

plan for each murder with extreme care, leaving a certain margin of flexibility so that I could adapt to changing circumstances and take advantage of good timing. Still, if there had not been a strong element of luck on my side, I might have been caught.

Now, at last I have my Julie, the charming estate in Connecticut with its stable of horses, the tennis court and swimming pool, the servants scurrying to satisfy every whim. We belong to the so-called better clubs where only the VIPs are seen, we have four expensive cars, and the whole world of travel and possession is no more difficult a problem than the signing of a check.

I suppose I should be in a constant state of rapture, gloating over my triumph, adoring Julie and the paradise which surrounds me. I still enjoy the easy living, the luxury and the unlimited freedom which the magic of two million dollars can buy. Yet after the first year with Julie, the conquest over, the mystery and excitement of her becoming known and unremarkable, I am truly bored with her.

Having reached her goal in the security of wealth, Julie has become bovine and docile, much too sweet and predictable to be interesting. Then too, there is no longer the challenge; the clever scheming, the

stealthy hunt, the action of the kill, and the heart-thumping risk.

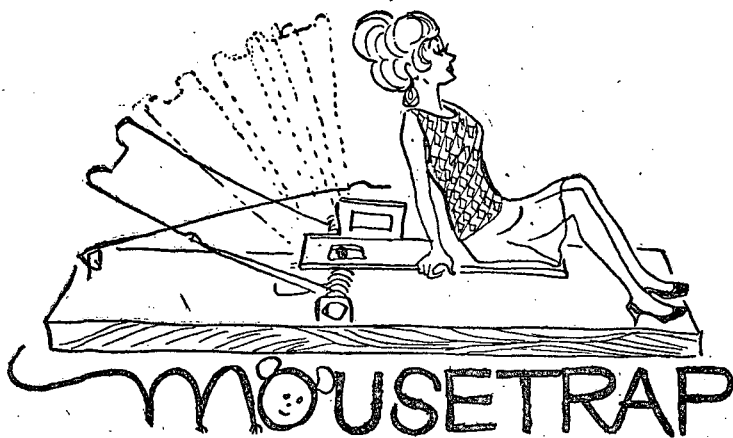
Lately, all against my good judgment, I find myself increasingly stimulated by one or two luscious females in our circle, especially by the wildly temperamental wife of a young man who inherited too much money. He never works at anything and is constantly racing cars, flying fast planes or skin-diving, all notoriously dangerous sports which often seem to result in tragic accidents.

On the other hand, Julie is unthinkable content with her life, and far from growing disenchanted with me, she appears to be more fascinated than ever. Since there is little hope that she will have a change of heart and cast me adrift with the major part of her fortune, I am deeply concerned about her future welfare and safety.

Only yesterday she was nearly killed riding horseback when a stirrup broke away as she was taking a hurdle. No matter how hard I try to erase this evil premonition from my mind, I can't help fearing that one day soon Julie will meet with a most unfortunate and fatal accident.

All of life is a gamble, however, and if this should happen I expect to bear it bravely. At least Julie and I have had one glorious year together.

The price of bait may seem high to some, but its value is measured by anticipated yield.



THERE was a pounding on his front door. Joe Chaviski turned on the light. It was two a.m. by his bedside clock, a full hour before the alarm was set to go off, rousing him to go fishing. The pounding continued. Who the devil would be wanting him at this hour?

"All right! All right!" Joe shouted, as his 260 pounds suddenly came alive. His great feet hit the floor lightly. He looked like a king-size teddy bear as he switched on the overhead light and started toward the front door. After turning on the porch light he peered

through the glass of the door into the frightened face of Frank Waverly, Fort Sanders' leading contractor.

by

Edwin P.
Hicks

Joe threw open the door. "Come in, Frank. What the hell—"

Waverly pushed through the door as if demons were clutching at his coattails.

"What's wrong, Frank?"

"I'm in trouble, Joe!"

"What kind of trouble?"

"Murder!" Waverly was shaking violently, his black eyes staring wildly. His suntanned face was three shades lighter than usual.

"Sit down!" Joe said. Waverly sank into the leather divan. "Here, light up a cigarette, and tell me what this is all about."

"Joe, I came to you for advice—and help. The police will be after me tomorrow as soon as the murder is discovered."

"Whose murder, Frank?"

"Sally Caviness," Waverly said. He took out his handkerchief and wiped his eyes.

"Sally Caviness!" Joe knew plenty about Sally Caviness. She was a pretty red-haired divorcee, and Frank Waverly's mistress. "Let me make some coffee," Joe said. "We'll both feel better."

While the coffee was perking Waverly would have time to pull himself together. This was going to be a mess! He and Frank Waverly had always been good friends. What a man does in his private life is his own business, and Joe had never mentioned Sally to

Frank. Yet Joe and Wanda Waverly were good friends, too, and Wanda was Frank's wife. Wanda had the money in the family, an inheritance, and she had financed Frank's early construction work until he had reached his present status as an extremely successful contractor, the builder of buildings, bridges and highways.

Frank was about forty-five, and Wanda was seven years younger. They had been married fifteen years, and there were no children. Sally Caviness? Joe shook his head. It was the old, old story of a well-to-do businessman making a fool of himself over a much younger woman. Sally wasn't yet thirty, and she was beautiful, extremely beautiful, with a figure that caused men to turn and watch when she passed on the street.

Joe turned off the three o'clock alarm on the bedstand clock. There went his fishing trip to Cove Lake. It was the 10th of October, the time of year when they hit on the surface.

He took the coffee into the livingroom. Frank Waverly was sitting there with his face buried in his hands. He looked weary, like an old man.

"Here, get some of this hot coffee in you," Joe said.

Slowly, sentence by sentence, Frank told his story. He had left

Sally's apartment in the Superior Arms at nine-thirty that night. She was happy when he left because, he said, he had told her that as soon as he obtained his divorce from Wanda they would be married. After a long pause, Waverly continued. "When I returned sometime after midnight with some good news, she was dead—she was lying on the floor on her back. And she had been shot!"

Joe put down his empty cup. "Did anyone see you go to, or leave, her apartment?"

"The elevator operator, in the early part of the night. He took me up about eight o'clock, but he was gone when I left at nine-thirty."

"What about the second time?"

"No one saw me. It is an automatic elevator, and the operator goes off duty at nine o'clock."

"You say you returned after midnight with good news. What was the good news?"

"I think it was a quarter after midnight. I went there to tell her we had caught Wanda—my wife, you know—in a compromising situation and that now Wanda could not possibly contest our divorce."

"What do you mean by 'compromising situation'?" Joe asked, bristling. He had known Wanda Waverly since she was a little girl. A police officer for thirty years

knows pretty well what goes on in his hometown—both on the surface and beneath. Wanda had a temper, all right, no question about that, but never had he heard the slightest word against Wanda's character.

"Just what I told you," Waverly said. "We found her in a compromising situation. I want you to keep this in confidence, Joe. We trailed her to the Picardy Hotel. She was there with a man."

"What man?" Joe said coldly.

"Harry Vallery."

"That son— You framed her, Frank. I *know* you framed her!"

"Yes, I framed her. She refused to give me a divorce so I could marry Sally."

"And now what do you want me to do?" Joe asked sharply.

"Joe, I haven't anybody to turn to now."

"How about Wanda?"

"Joe, man, I didn't kill Sally! I swear I didn't. But as soon as she's discovered, the police will be after me. They'll question the elevator operator and find out I was there last night. This whole town knows about Sally and me."

"Who else would be interested in killing Sally except you—or Wanda?"

"That's just it!" Waverly moaned. "And Wanda has a perfect alibi. She checked in at the

hotel sometime shortly after nine, was there all the time until we caught her there with Vallery, sometime between ten-thirty and ten forty-five. Then after we left, Vallery rode around with her for about thirty minutes. She seemed pretty much upset."

"Who's 'we'?" asked Joe.

"My private detective, Choc Churchill. And there was a photographer, Jim Durnell; and the hotel manager, and I."

"Then what?"

"I was waiting for Vallery in front of the Superior Arms, as planned. We sat in the car and talked and checked scores, to be together in the divorce proceedings if Wanda contested it. Then I went up to see Sally."

"Did you see anyone enter or leave the Superior Arms while you waited outside?"

"No."

"Where's Sally's divorced husband?"

"In Leavenworth prison, on a Dyer Act violation. He was a repeater and still has a year to serve."

"Why did you come to me?"

"Joe, you and I have been friends for a long time. You know I'm no saint, but I wouldn't kill anybody. I watched you for years on the police force. You're level-headed. The boys there will be hard on me, but they respect you. You've

got influence there. Please, Joe."

"The first thing I'm going to do," Joe said, "is call the police and tell them Sally's been murdered."

"Wait, Joe. You can tell them, all right, but I want you to go to the apartment and look the place over. See if you can dig out anything that points to the killer—and it's not me. You're the best detective they ever had. Those cubs they've got there now don't know what to look for."

"Go home, Frank."

"Go home? I haven't any home to go to after tonight."

"Then go to your hotel."

"I'll be at the Wardlow."

"Okay. You be there when we want you." Joe reached for the telephone.

Chief Detective Marty Sauer and Detective Frank Hopp were waiting in front of the Superior Arms when Joe drove up. Johnnie Brooksher, identification officer, got out of a parked car, carrying his camera and fingerprint kit.

"Sally Caviness was Frank Waverly's girl, wasn't she?" Sauer said.

Joe grinned. He had trained Sauer. He hadn't told headquarters who his informant was, and already Sauer was connecting Waverly with the crime.

Brooksher powdered the door-

knob to Sally's apartment, then swore. "Nothing; clean," he said.

Joe opened the door with Waverly's key. They entered—and there was Sally lying in the middle of the floor in front of a divan. She was wearing a sheer, blue nightgown and transparent negligee. There were three bullet holes in her chest.

"Twenty-five caliber automatic," said Brooksher, pouncing on three empty brass cartridges on the floor. An expensive stereophonic phonograph was playing a thunderous Beethoven sonata.

"Stop that racket," Sauer said. "It gives me the creeps."

"Would rock and roll sound any better at a time like this?" Joe growled. He turned off the stereo.

"Somebody must have been planning a celebration," Sauer said, "but if they were all that happy, why did he have to kill her? Somebody throw a sprag in the wheel?"

Again Joe was pleased. Let the boy's mind work. Ten years ago when Sauer moved up from car officer, the last thing anyone would have accused Sauer of was thinking.

Now Hopp was examining a framed photograph which he had found on Sally's dressing table in the bedroom. It was a recent photograph of Frank Waverly, and at the bottom was written, "To my darling Sally."

"A shame for a man like Frank Waverly to lose his head over a girl like this," Hopp said. "But she sure was a pretty one—and built!"

They let Brooksher photograph the body and the room, the glasses on the table, the bottle of champagne in the ice bucket. Then they began digging into things. Beneath a ruffled pillow on the divan Sauer found an ivory handled .25 caliber automatic.

Brooksher examined it, then shook his head disgustedly. "Wiped clean."

"All right," Sauer said, "tell us what you haven't told us, Joe. What do you know?"

Joe told them about Waverly coming to see him.

"All right, let's go pick him up," said Sauer. "He's bound to have done it—or if he didn't he knows something about it."

"Sure," said Joe, "only there's one thing I don't understand. If Frank Waverly had a quarrel with Sally and shot her, why would he leave the murder weapon, assuming that's the gun that killed her? And if he was fool enough to leave the gun here, because of some subconscious psychological quirk demanding that he be caught, why did he so carefully wipe the fingerprints off the gun?"

"Let's go ask Frank Waverly," Sauer said.



"You go ahead," said Joe. "He's at the Wardlow Hotel. Here's the key to Sally's apartment. I'm going home."

At home, all up in the air, Joe cooked breakfast. He was thinking about Frank Waverly and the pitiful sight of gorgeous Sally Cavinness lying dead on the floor of her apartment, but most of all he was thinking of Wanda Waverly.

He knew Wanda as one of the finest women in the city of Fort Sanders. She was wealthy. She could be hard. She had a reputation of ruling women's organizations to which she belonged with a

firm hand. But as far as anyone knew she was a faithful and devoted wife. There hadn't been a breath of scandal about her, even when the town was buzzing about Frank and Sally. Frank had been seeing Sally now for two years—just another damn fool man and a pretty gold-digger of a girl.

Say that Frank and Sally had had a quarrel—maybe Sally had threatened to blackmail him. Few men ever shot a woman blackmailer. He might slap her around or beat her up or, in a rage, even strangle her. Yet if Waverly had done the unusual and shot Sally, why had he carefully wiped his

fingerprints off the gun and left it where it would be found?

Another thing, too—that little ivory handled .25 caliber pistol was a woman's choice of weapons. A man would use a larger gun, a .32 or a .38 at least. That ivory handle also pointed to a woman's touch. Yet what woman? The only two women so far in the case were poor dead Sally, and Wanda Waverly. Yet Wanda had been in the Picardy hotel at the time the murder must have occurred, and she had witnesses to prove it—the very best of witnesses—her husband, a private detective, a photographer, the hotel manager, and Vallery.

Joe Chaviski decided to go fishing anyway. He wanted to hit Cove Lake right at sunup. He was leaving an hour later than he'd planned, but by driving fast he still might make it.

The car, boat and trailer moved at seventy miles an hour along Highway 22, then south from Paris, around the winding hill road at a slower pace. The top of Mount Magazine was wreathed in a fog, but the eastern sky was all ablaze and the water of the lake was still cloaked in shadow as he backed his trailer down the launching ramp. He loaded the boat, Lucy, with his rods, his tackle box, his water jug and lunchbox, and two life preservers. He put in his

gasoline tank and attached it to the motor, then he threw in a paddle.

Joe moved to various hot spots about the lake casting diligently. On this date for the last two years he had caught big bass, but Old John Bass was not at home this morning. At times Joe sat back and just enjoyed being out. There was a ripple on the surface as the sun moved over the hill and transformed the opposite shore into a kaleidoscope of color—the red of sumac, persimmon, sweetgum and water oak, the green of cedar and pine, intermingling with shadowing blue haze and gray crags.

Joe fished until noon, catching a few small ones and releasing them as fast as he caught them. He devoured his lunch hungrily, topping it off with a quart of sweet milk he had kept in the ice box. Then he turned his boat back toward the landing and soon had it on the trailer and heading home. His trip had been a disappointment, but he had done a powerful lot of thinking—going over all the angles of the Caviness murder.

As soon as he had unloaded his boat at home and changed clothes, he drove to the police station. Brooksher had news for him. The bullets removed from Sally's body in the autopsy had been fired from the little automatic found beneath

the pillow, and Frank Waverly had admitted buying the gun three years before. The prosecuting attorney would file a murder charge against him in the morning.

"Has Waverly cracked yet?" Joe asked.

"No," Brooksher said. "We advised him of his rights not to answer questions, but he waived everything. We grilled him then for several hours. He swears he knew nothing of Sally's death until he walked into her apartment and found her lying on the floor. Then, he said, he beat it to you, hoping you could help him."

Joe went to Waverly's cell and sat down with him on the cot. "What about the gun, Frank? They say it's yours."

"Sure it's mine. I told them I bought it at the Star Hardware Store three years ago."

"How do you explain it being the murder weapon?"

"I can't explain it—except it was taken from my cottage on Sugar Loaf Lake in a break-in a little over a week ago. The sheriff has a report on the burglary."

"What was it doing at the cottage?"

Waverly hesitated before he answered. "It was Wanda's. I bought it for her three years ago."

"How did they gain entrance?"

"Broke out the window with a

rock, then climbed through it."

"You still sticking to your guns, you didn't kill Sally?"

"Joe, you know I didn't. I'm innocent. I'm asking you to help me."

Joe waddled out of the cell. At the door of the corridor he came face to face with Frazier Amanda, one of the city's best criminal lawyers. Amanda nodded and walked on toward Waverly's cell. Well, there went ten thousand dollars of Waverly's money at the very least, Joe said to himself.

As Joe drove up in front of the Waverly home, the woman who came out and got into a taxicab seemed disturbed, and didn't speak to him, although he knew her well. It was Elizabeth Andrews, the last survivor of one of the oldest families in Fort Sanders, and a friend of Wanda Waverly since childhood. Perhaps she had stopped in to offer her sympathy to Wanda. The story of Sally's murder and of Frank Waverly being picked up had been on television throughout the day.

A maid answered the doorbell. Wanda Waverly came into the livingroom almost immediately.

"I'm glad to see you, Joe," she said.

"Wanda, what's all this nonsense about you going to the Picardy with Harry Vallery?"

She colored, but quickly recov-

ered her composure. "Joe, my husband, Frank—he has not— Mr. Vallery is a charming man."

"And you are a charming liar," said Joe. "Come on, help me out, Wanda. You're a smart woman, and I know you better than that."

She laughed. "Who are you working for—for Frank?"

"Yes, for Frank, but not for money. He came to see me last night after he found Miss Caviness' body."

"Yes, I know. It has been on television all day. The police came to see me this morning, but of course I knew nothing about it. Poor Frank. I was afraid he would wind up in a mess with that Sally Caviness."

"Frank told me that he framed you last night, set up a little deal with Harry Vallery."

Again she laughed, but she said nothing.

"Wanda, I came to you first. If you don't play ball with me, I'm going to Harry Vallery. A man has a way of getting a rat like Vallery to talk, and legally. Frank admitted he framed you. I know darn well you weren't infatuated with Harry Vallery. You're too sensible a woman. And I know you didn't go there to make Frank jealous. You had always opposed giving him his freedom to marry Sally. It just doesn't add up, you suddenly going

to the hotel with Harry Vallery."

Wanda studied Joe for several seconds. Then she smiled. "All right, Joe. I knew when I first walked into this room that you would keep after it until you got



the truth. I wasn't seduced by that gallant young Casanova, Harry Vallery. He's ten years younger than I—and I'm a married woman and—well, I'm not that kind of a gal."

"Then why—"

"It was obvious from the first that Frank had hired Harry to make up to me. Frank was making out of town trips more often than usual—to give Harry every opportunity of seeing me. Harry took me out to dinner several times, became very ardent—finally propositioned me, in a gentlemanly manner of course—and let it slip that Frank was playing around with Sally, something I had known for a long time.

"I forced his hand, bribed him with a little money, and learned Frank was paying him a thousand dollars to get me to go to a hotel with him. He was doing this, of course, to compromise me so I would be easy pickings in the divorce suit which he would file."

"So you played right into his hands?"

"Yes, but for a purpose. By matching Frank's money, I got Harry's promise to tell the whole drab story when the case came up in divorce court. I was confident that when the whole picture went before the judge, my lawyer and I could make Frank Waverly hate

the day he had ever seen Harry Vallery—or Sally Caviness."

Joe whistled. "I would hate to play poker with you, Wanda."

She laughed. "I'm no angel, Joe. My father didn't leave his money to me to have a man like Frank Waverly take it away—nor a Sally Caviness either. When it comes to fighting dirty, I can get just as dirty as they can—or a little dirtier. I've always been able to hate, Joe. I never forget, never forgive."

"Okay," said Joe. "I was going to ask what you wanted me to do about Frank. After all, you must have some affection for him after fifteen years of marriage."

For a moment the poise and bravado left Wanda. "I loved Frank dearly, Joe, gave him everything. I was entirely faithful to him in thought as well as deed. Then this hussy, Sally Caviness, came into his life. All he has wanted for the past two years was a divorce, and that hurt, Joe. But, in addition, he wanted the lion's share of our joint holdings—for Sally, understand—for Sally!"

Now she was laughing again. Joe thought she was near hysteria.

"I wish," she said, "I wish I could have seen his face when he walked into her apartment and found her lying dead, *dead* on the floor!"

That evening Joe cornered Harry

Vallery. Within five minutes, Harry was spilling everything he knew—how Frank Waverly indeed had hired him to seduce his wife and how Wanda had suspected what he was up to and had induced him with more money to betray Waverly.

"When did she agree to play along?" Joe asked.

"About two weeks ago. Let's see, it was the night her husband was supposed to be in St. Louis. Yes, it was two weeks ago last night. She said she would go along on a fake date to the hotel—and a fake was all it was."

That night, after Joe had finished his supper, he walked the floor for more than an hour, pounding his fist at intervals, and scrubbing at his grizzled, short-cropped hair. "Dammit!" he said. "Dammit!"

He reasoned there had to be a fourth party in the murder case. It couldn't be Harry Vallery, for Vallery's movements were accounted for every second the night Sally Caviness was murdered. He was with Wanda Waverly, or at his apartment waiting for a call from Wanda, or with Frank Waverly, every minute between the time Frank had left Sally's apartment and had returned there to find her body. It couldn't be Wanda, al-

though he knew now, from the moment she had lost her poise, of the agony that Frank and Sally had caused her—and of her bitterness and hatred not only for Sally but perhaps for Frank as well. He knew that she was woman enough to kill Sally, had the opportunity presented itself, but Wanda's alibi was Harry Vallery and the hotel. Hopp and Sauer had checked at the hotel, and she had been there from nine-fifteen on. She'd had coffee sent up to her room at nine-thirty, had returned the tray at ten.

It most surely was not Frank Waverly—that is, there was no reason for it before the raid on Wanda and Harry at the hotel. All this was being done so that Frank and Sally could marry—by compromising Wanda into giving him a divorce. Yet if Frank had killed Sally when he went to her apartment the second time, what was the reason? Why had he carefully wiped his fingerprints off the murder weapon and then left it at the scene of the crime, carefully placed beneath a pillow on the divan? No, it wasn't plausible that he had done it. The bottle of champagne in the bucket of ice was mute testimony that Frank and Sally had planned to celebrate if everything went well in framing Wanda at the Picardy Hotel.

There just had to be somebody

else, some forth party involved in all this mess, who hated Sally Caviness. Could it have been a discarded lover? You never could tell when a jealous man was going to get violent. If so, how did the Waverly gun figure in it? A coincidence? Had the discarded lover broken into the Waverly cottage, stolen the gun, and then shot Sally? The odds against such a coincidence were too great to consider.

Definitely someone was out to get Frank Waverly—to mousetrap him. *Mousetrap?* Joe stopped short in his pacing and stood there scratching his head.

Mousetrap—in competitive business, Joe knew, a firm might try to make the opposition think they were going to do one thing, and then do another, as a clever criminal might bait a trap, then clobber the victim who walked into it. But in the killing of Sally Caviness? What about a clever amateur—how would he or she operate? Joe felt there was something phony about this Sally Caviness murder, yet for the life of him he couldn't fit all the pieces together. He decided to fall back on regulation police routine.

He rechecked the hotel, backtracking Sauer and Hopp. Their report on Wanda Waverly's stay there—the time of registering, the time she called room service, the

time she sent back the tray—was entirely accurate. Next, Joe drove by the Black and White Cab Company headquarters. Had Wanda driven to the Picardy in her own car or had she called a cab? Waverly had told him that Vallery and Wanda had driven around for about thirty minutes after the raid on the hotel room, but he hadn't said whether Vallery had taken her directly home or back to the hotel where Wanda would have left her car—perhaps parked on the street.

There was no record of a call to the Waverly address. Joe began checking the calls the cabs had made to the Picardy that night. There had been eight. Five of them had been in the early part of the evening between six and nine o'clock, one had been at ten-ten, two had been around midnight.

The ten-ten call was interesting. It had been made by cab No. 150, and Chuck Frambers was the driver. The dispatcher's assistant located him at home. Sure, he remembered the call. It was a good-looking dame about forty years old. She had been wearing something blue. He had taken her from the hotel to her home at 201 North Sixteenth Street. He ought to know her name, but couldn't think of it right off. No, she wasn't drinking, wasn't a hustler or anything like that; a nice woman. She was blonde and

"real pretty" in his estimation.

A check of the calls between eight-thirty and nine-fifteen that night showed none to 201 North Sixteenth Street, but that didn't mean anything. The woman could have gone to the hotel with a friend and then come home by cab. Or she could have walked the short distance over to Main Street and been picked up there by a cab. Or, she could have dined at a restaurant somewhere and gone to the hotel from there.

In the old days Joe could pretty well have named every person living on North Sixteenth. It was in the better section of the older part of Fort Sanders. He would drive past 201 North Sixteenth Street. This "nice" attractive lady going home alone from the Picardy at ten-ten o'clock at night—no women's party or anything like that—intrigued him.

First, Joe drove by the other cab company, the Checkered Cab. He was lucky immediately. Their call records showed No. 235 had made a call to 201 North Sixteenth at 9:08. The driver, Lem Johnson, was called to the office.

"Let's see," he said. "Sure, that was a snappy looking lady I picked up at the old brick house. Sure, I remember her—dressed in a light blue suit. No spring chicken, but a real dazzler. Kinda tall but good

shape. Dark hair. Never seen her before, but I'm new in this town. I took her to the Picardy Hotel. Seemed kinda excited. No floozie—a real nice lady. That's all I can tell you."

Blonde . . . brunette! A brunette going to the hotel, a blonde coming from the hotel! Otherwise identical description. One of these guys must be color blind. Joe headed for 201 North Sixteenth. Then, on the way, it hit him—he knew who lived there. He headed for the police station.

Marty Sauer was just getting into his car. He was calling it a day.

Joe drove up beside him. "Come on, get in the car," he said.

"What for?"

"Going to talk to someone."

"What about?"

"You coming, or do I get the sheriff?" Joe asked.

Sauer piled in beside Joe. "Where we going?"

"We're going to have a little chat with Miss Elizabeth Andrews about the Sally Caviness case."

Sauer whistled. "I never heard Waverly was fooling around her, Joe."

"Neither did I," Joe said.

They parked in front of an aging brick house with white columns, apparently in need of repair. Two giant magnolia trees stood in front, and the yard was covered with

dead leaves. It was nearing sunset, and a mockingbird was trilling from one of the magnolias. A faded sign above the door read "School of the Drama."

Joe gave a twist to the old-fashioned doorbell. Elizabeth Andrews came to the door wearing a blue housecoat. She was a woman of impressive beauty, and the styling of her platinum blonde hair was a work of art.

"Why, Mr. Chaviski—I hardly recognized you. I'm so excited I hardly know what I'm doing. I'm closing my school, Mr. Chaviski."

"Closing your school!"

Elizabeth's eyes were red; she had been crying. She led them to the livingroom. "Yes, closing it. There will be an announcement in Sunday's paper. I'm returning to Hollywood. But be seated, gentlemen. What can I do for you?"

"Returning?" Joe said.

"Why, yes. I'm sure you remember. I was out there years ago—it's been too long. It's wonderful to be going back."

"Signed up for another picture?"

"Well, not exactly. I'm going out there to spend the winter, and confer with my agent. I'd like to get in television. But, Mr. Chaviski, this is—"

"Marty Sauer. Detective Marty Sauer of the police department."

"Police department! Goodness!

I've been rattling along. Why have you come to see me?"

"It's about this Frank Waverly case," Joe said bluntly.

Elizabeth's face suddenly went white—then very red.

"You are a good friend of Wanda Waverly, aren't you? I saw you leaving her house yesterday afternoon."

"A very, very dear friend, Mr. Chaviski. I was so grieved when I heard on television about Sally Caviness, and Frank Waverly being held, I went right over to see Wanda. Wanda didn't deserve this. She made Frank what he is today. He wasn't anything until he got her."

"Yes, yes—I know." Chaviski's eyes swept about the room. A bit of plaster the size of his hand was missing near one corner of the ceiling. There were cracks in the plaster on the opposite wall. The covering on the arms of his chair was frayed. The carpet had been worn through in front of the door and in front of the chairs. "We've come to take you over to Wanda's," Joe said.

"But Wanda doesn't want to see me again. I've done all I can do."

"I don't think so," said Joe. He smiled without mirth.

She studied him. "All right," she said quietly. "Let me get something on."

Elizabeth was silent all the way

to the Waverly house. When Wanda appeared she looked pale, but she still carried her head high.

"You again, Joe? And you, Liz?"

Joe came directly to the point. "This is Detective Marty Sauer of the police department. We have been checking Miss Andrews' movements the night Sally Cavinness was killed."

Elizabeth half rose from her chair, her hands going quickly to her mouth. "Wanda, I haven't told them a thing!"

"Don't you want to tell us all about it, Wanda?" Joe said.

"Tell you about what, Joe?"

"Just how deeply is Miss Andrews involved in this thing with you, Wanda? It would be a shame if she missed the chance to go back to Hollywood."

For the first time, Wanda dropped her head. She began speaking in a voice hardly audible. "It's no use—no use denying it. You wouldn't be here if you hadn't figured it out. And I thought I was being so clever!" Then she raised her head, and her old voice came out defiantly: "Elizabeth is entirely innocent, Joe, damn you." She softened the oath with a smile. "She put two and two together when she heard about Sally on television yesterday, and came over here to have it out with me. I told her to keep her mouth shut, forget

what she didn't know and merely suspected—and I would pay her expenses in Hollywood for at least six months."

"I haven't told them a thing!" Elizabeth repeated.

Wanda smiled. "Don't worry, Elizabeth. The deal still stands. You see, up until yesterday all Elizabeth had done for me was to spend an hour or so in the role of Wanda Waverly at the Picardy. I knew she needed money desperately, and I told her I would pay her two hundred dollars if she would register in my name at the hotel. I told her that Frank was trying to frame me, and that it was necessary for me to be in two places at once that night. She agreed. She went to the hotel early, made up like me—same clothes, same accessories, and a dark wig matching my natural hair. She called room service in twenty-odd minutes, as I had directed, and had them send up something. This was to establish proof that 'I' was in the room all the time. Then after a time she sent the empty plates back down again, tipping the waiter very well so he'd remember. The desk clerk knew neither one of us. That's all in the world Elizabeth knew or did."

"We won't press charges against Miss Andrews," Joe said, but he knew she'd be a key witness in the event of a trial.

Wanda continued: "When hate takes a person over she becomes blind to reason. Frank became contemptuous in my eyes. I actually began to hate him more than I did Sally. It wasn't just a case of protecting my own money, the money my father left me. I wanted to hurt Frank in the worst way."

"So you mousetrapped him," Joe said. "You agreed to the deal with Harry Vallery, in this way setting up a perfect alibi. You had Miss Andrews, impersonating you, register in your name at the Picardy. The arrangement was that when you were ready you would call Vallery at his apartment, and he would come to your hotel room—to be followed fifteen minutes later by your husband, the photographer, and other witnesses."

"Yes, Joe. While Elizabeth was registered in my name at the hotel, I waited half a block down the street from the Superior Arms until Frank left Sally's apartment. Of course I had known for months where the love-nest was located. I had the little automatic with me, the one reported stolen from the

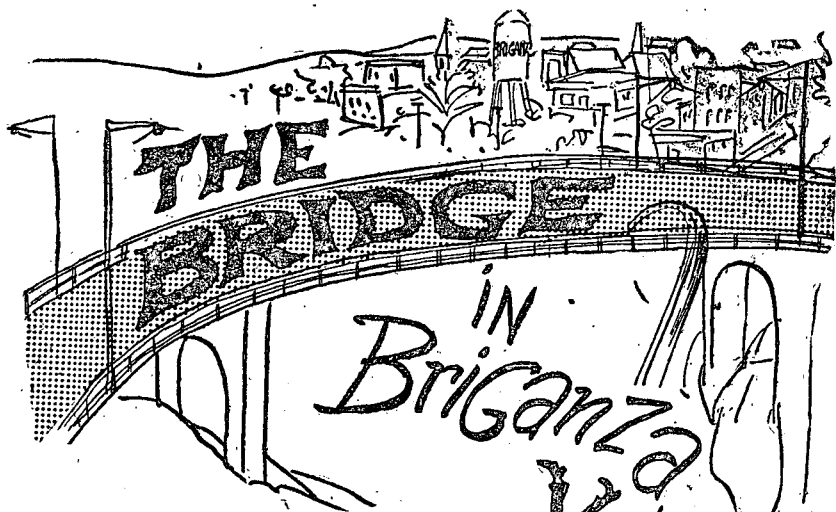
lakeside cottage. Frank came out about nine-thirty, got in his car and drove off to meet with Harry at his apartment. I entered the Superior Arms immediately, wearing a blonde wig in case I should meet someone, which I didn't. Sally didn't recognize me in the wig when she opened the door a crack. I whispered to her that I had a message from Harry Vallery, and she let me in. I removed my wig then, so she would know who I was, turned up the stereo—and shot her three times as she whined for mercy. You know the rest."

Joe nodded. "You went to the hotel then, relieved Miss Andrews, and made your call to Harry Vallery at his apartment. You figured you had the perfect alibi—you had been at the hotel all evening, now you were meeting Harry Vallery there—and your husband and his raiders would be witnesses to the fact that you couldn't possibly have murdered Sally Caviness."

Wanda lifted her head regally. "Eliminating Sally gave me more satisfaction than anything I have ever done," she said.



The anecdotal feint, it seems, is a subtility which one does not develop overnight.



CHARLIE THAYER was here, of course; old Charlie the lawyer, having his first extremely dry one at the far end of the bar, but he was the only customer of the morning until this young fellow breezed in and started talking about killing himself. He wasn't wearing so much as a topcoat and outside the storm was blowing up to blizzard proportions; no hat either, the snow melting in his red hair. What he wore was one of those sloppy slip-on sweaters, green and furry;

By
Frank
Sisk

a checkered sports shirt open at the neck; and a pair of blue jeans slingshot tight.

As soon as he plants a foot in the place, I ask, "Is that your car in front, the little foreign job?"

"Mine and the financiers'," he says. "A double whiskey."

"Well, they're going to tow it away if you leave it there, Jack," I say. "It's been on the radio since daybreak."

"That's about the tenth piece of bad news I've heard since last night, but somehow it doesn't grab me. I need that whiskey, pal."

"What kind?" I notice now that he looks chilled to the bone, kind of purple.

"I don't care. Any kind."

"Scotch, Irish, Canadian, Greek," I say with a wink at Charlie. "You name it, we probably got it."

"Irish, I guess." He's taken a fresh handkerchief from his hip pocket and snapped it open. "Sure. Why the hell not? It fits."

"She's an Irish girl then?" Charlie asks in that soft voice he uses to edge into conversations where half the time he is not wanted.

"Part Irish," the young fellow says, mopping the melting snow from his face and neck with the handkerchief. "Mostly Irish, with a little Canadian French somewhere down the line." Then he realizes he's talking to somebody he's never

seen before. "Hey there, Pop. You a practicing mind reader?"

"I'm a battle-scarred veteran of life, that's all," Charlie says.

"Give this gentleman whatever he's drinking," the young fellow says, placing a finiff on the mahogany. "Ever been married, Pop?"

"Permit me to properly introduce myself," the old boy says, knowing he's got a live one. "Charles Kensington Thayer. Charlie, among friends."

"Munson," the young fellow says, shaking hands. "Walt Munson."

"A pleasure, Walt," Charlie says. "And to answer your question: yes, once upon a time, more years ago than I care to remember, I fell prey to the wiles of a lovely lady and was bonded securely in matrimony."

"You still working at it?" the young fellow asks.

"As little as possible," Charlie says. "May I presume to say the same for yourself?"

"You're firing on all eight," the young man says. Then he downs the double Irish the way it's done out west on TV, only he's not exactly an old cowhand and he suddenly becomes the same color as his finiff on the bar. What saves him from turning inside out is the water chaser.

"Cheers," Charlie says, not really

noticing. "Now let me hazard a guess, Walt, as to what's eating you. Satan has entered the garden. Correct me if I'm wrong."

Walt takes five deep breaths and gradually turns white again; pale, in fact, and he says, "You're right, Charlie. Another round of the same, pal. But make mine a single this time. You're right all right, Charlie."

"Satan in the form of a man?" Charlie says.

"What else," Walt says.

"In the form of a friend?" Charlie asks. "Of an alleged friend?"

Walt nods his head and his eyes get moist. "Hell, man, we chummed. Elbow buddies. We played together in a three-man combo a few nights a week around. Not for money, just for kicks. I blew the drums and him the lico-
rice. Benny Goodman, third class, but all charm, all leader. And then it has to turn out like this. Jeez! His name is Charlie too."

"I'm not surprised," Charlie says. "It takes me back to Briganza, down Texas way, where something similar happened to me more years ago than I care to remember."

"Briganza?" Walt says as if the name itself sort of shifted the whole scene.

"Yes, Briganza, Walt," Charlie says, motioning for a refill. "Not a big town as towns go. Ever hear

of it? You wouldn't forget it."

"No, I don't think so."

Nobody else ever heard of it either, except some of our regular customers. It's not on any map of Texas I've ever looked at, and I've looked at plenty since Charlie first brought the name into some crazy conversation a few years back.

"Picture, if you will," Charlie says dreamily, "a town with a population of twenty thousand thereabouts and an elevation of approximately three hundred feet above sea level. Sketch in a newly married couple who, physically and spiritually, are living at the highest point in this town. Month after blissful month passes and then suddenly a shadow falls athwart the sunlight. The shadow is an alleged friend of—of whom, Walt? Of whom?"

"Of the husband," Walt says quickly, as if he'd been there in person, and he tosses off the Irish in a gulp. It doesn't faze him much this time. "Give my friend Charlie here another drink," he says. "And me too."

"Obliged, my boy," Charlie says. "Much obliged. And the happy husband, enjoying to the fullest the sweet fruits of matrimony, looks upon his good friend, who is a bachelor, and pities him. He pities him."

"That's it, Charlie," Walt says.

"I pitied the poor lonesome devil."

"You invite him home for a home-cooked meal," Charlie says.

"Many times," Walt says.

"Too many times," Charlie says.

"I must've been blind, deaf and dumb," Walt says, tears in his eyes again. "I trusted him and I trusted her. Trusted."

"But the bachelor is a man of great charm," Charlie says. "He can afford to be. He has no commitments. He is free of the little bickering debates that are part and parcel of even the soundest marriage. He is always seen at his best, and when he is tired or bored he retires. He has the means to buy a bouquet for the hostess because he doesn't have to pay for the meat and potatoes. He can pander to her small prejudices because he doesn't have to face them every day of the week . . ."

Walt slaps the bar. "Oh, man, have you ever got it nailed down! You might've been the rugs in our apartment and not have got it better."

Charlie smiles, pleased with himself. "And it transpired last night here, as it did twenty-some years ago in Briganza, that the bachelor stole away from paradise with the bride of his best friend, leaving nothing behind but an irrevocable farewell message on a sheet of that ruled yellow paper so prized by at-

torneys for the jotting of dubious legalities . . ."

"They didn't write," Walt says sadly. "They phoned from some place in Maryland, on the way to Miami. Charlie, the cur, seems to've got a place in one of the big-hotel bands down there and sees possibilities of Irene being a vocalist. My wife a vocalist? Nutty-nutty."

"Forgive and forget," Charlie says, taking the size sip from his glass that helps you do it.

"I can't," Walt says, and he goes over to the front window, glass in hand, and looks through the slanting snow at his little car, now pretty nearly covered by drifts. "I couldn't sleep all night from the pain of it, and when I climbed into my car a while back, you know what I had in mind? I was going to get myself killed."

"I guess that's the only real way to forget," Charlie says. "What method did you have in mind, Walt?"

Walt still stares out at the snow. "The Broad Street Bridge method," he says. "You heard the radio all morning warning motorists to keep off it, especially small cars and trailers. High winds up to sixty, sixty-five, apt to blow you off the bridge and down into the river, a hell of a long drop. So that's what I had in mind when I started

out this morning—drive onto the Broad Street Bridge and convert myself into a man-size ice cube.”

“Have you changed your mind?” Charlie asks. “And I hope not.”

Walt turns around slowly, looking a little drunk and a little surprised. “You hope not? That what you said, Pop?”

“Call me Charlie,” Charlie says. “And there’s nothing wrong with your hearing, Walt. If you still plan to take the plunge, I’d like to buy us a final drink and make you a proposition.”

“Yeah?” Walt says. “Like what?”

“Take me along for the ride,” Charlie says, his face very serious. “Pour us one for the road,” he says to me.

“I’ve had enough,” Walt says. “What kind of rib is this, Pop?”

“No rib at all, Walt,” Charlie says. “I simply think you have the solution to my problem and yours. I should have seen it myself a long time ago, many years ago, but you’ve helped me put it in perspective.”

Walt’s eyes widened. “Listen, Pop, if you lived with it all these

years, you got it made. It’s all downhill now.”

“It’s been all downhill since the day I left Briganza,” Charlie says, and he sighs deeply.

“As bad as that, is it?” Walt asks. “Even after all this time?”

“It gets worse every day,” Charlie says.

“Oh?” Walt says. “I’ll have that drink after all. Don’t they have any bridges in Briganza, Charlie?”

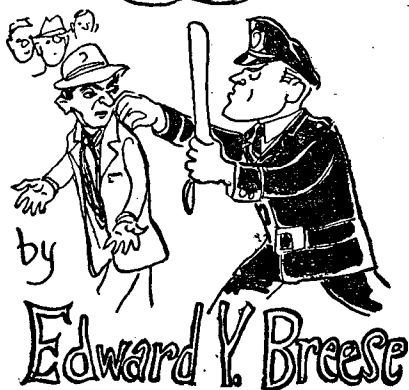
“Just one,” Charlie says. “It spans a dry gulch. Not very high compared to the Broad Street Bridge, yet a swan dive from its topmost rail can be fatal. As was the case of the husband (his name was Cyril) in the triangular story I’ve been telling you about. They say he was split open from clavicle to coccyx.”

Walt’s mouth falls open. “*The husband?* I thought you were the husband, Pop?”

“I am now,” Charlie says with another sad sigh. “But then I was the bachelor of ineffable charm. Looking back over the many bitter cups I have drunk, I am sure that Cyril was luckier than he knew.”



Patience is said to remedy all ills, but propitious timing is not to be despised.



ONE MINUTE I had it, the one opportunity every new policeman dreams about. I had headlines, my picture on page one, a sure commendation from the commissioner, maybe even promotion. I had it right there in my hand.

Less than a day later everybody, from the chief down, looked at me as if I were some kind of hairy spider. I began to wonder if I hadn't better just quietly turn in my badge and go away—far, far away and never show my face in town again. After what I'd told Sally on the phone earlier I didn't want to go home. I didn't want to stay around the station house either, what with the way Captain Harrigan kept looking at me. It would take a miracle to save my neck at all.

At two-fifteen p.m. on a Thursday afternoon at the intersection of Elm and Main Streets I'd made the pinch of the decade, maybe even of the century. I'd taken a jewel robber practically in the act, only three blocks from the scene of the crime. I had him cuffed before Sol Abrams back at the Elite

Jewelry had stopped screaming for help and while the alarm bells were still ringing. I'd had him in sight from the second he popped out of the front door of the store with the Star of Ishtar, a \$65,000 diamond and ruby brooch, in his pocket. A mob of excited citizens saw me do it. I was a hero.

Now, they were getting ready to turn him loose. In spite of everything, he would be walking away from the station house as soon as his lawyer finished with the legal mumbo-jumbo. We had the right man. I knew it. We all knew it, but he was going to walk away.

It wasn't because of any legal trickery or farfetched interpretation of a court decision either. Nobody's civil or constitutional rights had even been bent, let alone violated. For once we couldn't pass the buck in that direction. We were letting him go for *lack of evidence*.

Somewhere in a three-block stretch of the busiest downtown thoroughfare in our town, a one-and-one-half by two-inch diamond and ruby brooch had vanished into thin air. What I mean is, he'd gotten rid of the loot. What's more, he'd done it when he was never actually out of my sight; when, in fact, I'd been continuously in hot pursuit.

How? That's what I was killing

myself trying to figure out. There had to be a reasonable explanation, but neither I nor anyone else on the force could figure it out.

At just about two o'clock that afternoon a small, quite ordinary looking citizen had walked into the Elite Jewelry Store on Elm Street. It later developed that, despite his innocuous appearance, he was actually Walter (Weasel) Enko, with an armed robbery record as long as your arm. His specialty was jewelry store heists. Probably that's how he knew exactly what to do and how to go about doing it.

Apparently Weasel had cased the store layout well in advance. Anyway, he drifted inconspicuously past the two clerks and three customers in the front of the store to the short corridor leading to Sol Abrams' private office in back. If anyone noticed, he thought nothing of it. Lots of Sol's customers go back to see him from time to time. As a matter of fact, the clerks had orders not to be too nosy about who some of them were. Sol did a good deal of confidential buying and selling.

Weasel wasn't interested in either. In the corridor he pulled a silk stocking out of his pocket and put it over his face for a mask. It's amazing how that'll blur a man's features, particularly when

he also has a hat pulled down over the brow and ears. The best Sol could say later was that he "thought" Weasel was the man. Any good lawyer can demolish that sort of testimony.

The next item Weasel produced was a pair of ordinary cotton gloves. Once these were on, he pulled a small caliber pistol and stepped through the door of the private office:

Sol looked up from the desk where he was appraising some jewelry for insurance purposes.

"Yes," Weasel said, "it's a gun. It's a stickup, in case you were wondering."

In spite of what his mother-in-law thinks, Sol Abrams is no fool. "So I see," he said. "I'm no hero. Just tell me what you want."

"No secret alarm buttons. No judo. No nothing." Weasel told him. "I'm a pro and I know my business. This gun isn't much, but it'll make a nice round hole in that bald head of yours if I want it to."

Sol kept his hands on the top of the desk. "I understand."

"All right then. I want just one piece, the Star of Ishtar diamond. Just take it out of the safe and give it here. And hurry."

Sol did as he was told. He kept his fingers off the alarm buttons on his desk and the safe. The small gun looked like a cannon to

him, so he followed directions.

Weasel gave the brooch a careful once-over. Then, using his left hand, he took a blue jeweler's box, just the right size, out of his coat pocket and put the brooch into it. Sol swears it's the same blue box I took from Weasel not ten minutes later. He's absolutely positive about *that* identification. Fat lot of good it did though.

"What else you want?" Sol asked.

Weasel surprised him. "Nothing. This is what I came for, and this is all I want. Now, Mr. Abrams, I'm going to show you something."

"What?"

"A new judo chop." Weasel was as good as his word. "I told you, I'm a pro. I think of everything, Mr. Abrams."

It seems he wasn't quite that much of a pro, though. According to Sol, who knows a lot about judo, Weasel doesn't know very much. Instead of a chop, Weasel tried for a pressure point but Sol managed to twist his head and neck enough to spoil most of the effect, and Weasel didn't notice. Sol slumped down, did his best to look out for the count, and it worked.

When Sol boasted about it later at the station, he kept saying, "I can't stand amateurs. Punks who don't know their business . . ."

That upset Weasel even more than being pinched by a rookie patrolman. Hurt his professional pride, I guess. He'd planned that heist for months, thought of everything that might happen, timed it to a split second. Yes, sir, he figured he'd covered everything, then he fumbled one little detail. He got too smart and tried something fancy. If he'd just used the old reliable clout with his pistol butt, Sol would have stayed out of the picture ten minutes or so, and Weasel would have had time for a nice clean getaway. Or would he?

Who knows? I'm just a rookie still, and there's a lot I don't know. Captain Harrigan thinks he would have. Sergeant Brodie says no. "Something always goes wrong on a heist."

I kind of agree with Brodie. Crooks like Weasel Enko always seem to get just a little too smart for their own good. Anyway, Sol gave Weasel just about time to get to the front of the store before he stopped playing dead and began to push assorted panic buttons. Red lights went on down at the station house and in the office of his private eye agency. Lights blinked at the clerks' stations. The bells and sirens inside and outside the store made a racket like a heavy bomber raid was expected.

That's where I came in. I'm

brand new, a ten-months-in-uniform foot patrolman on that part of Elm St. When the alarm banged I was on the corner a block away, easing my sore feet and waiting for end-of-shift in fifteen minutes.

As I remember, I was watching a curvy blonde with one eye and tapping assorted trash down the rain gutter with my night stick. I'd already disposed of one of those rubber strap-sandals they call zoriss and three empty cigarette packs. I remembered wondering how people lose one shoe. The streets are full of them, but I never see anybody dangling *one* foot out of a car window. I had just made a carom shot off the curb with a cigarette box, when the bells and siren cut loose, and I forgot all about trash. Both eyes got back to business.

I spotted the right store in time to see Weasel pop out like a champagne cork. He had the mask off, of course, but this was a man in a hurry for sure. He whipped across the sidewalk past a dozen frozen citizens. I saw him slap something into the big red, white and blue mailbox at the curb. Then he crossed the street, right through traffic, to my side, and got into an old foreign economy car parked at the curb.

By this time I was running up the street, but it's a long block



and he pulled away from the curb into traffic before I was more than halfway to him.

I wasn't worried. I knew he couldn't get up much real speed in that heavy downtown traffic. Elm is four-lane and one-way on that stretch, and it's solid with cars all day and half the night. That's why a quiet get-away was so important for Weasel.

He would probably have done better to leave the car and try to beat me through the crowd to one of the big department stores where he could lose himself among shoppers. That car was a lot easier to follow than he would have been on foot, but maybe he forgot how bad traffic can be. Anyway, he took off in the car with me in hot pursuit, as the papers say.

He only made three blocks, as it turned out, with me gaining on him all the way. When he hit the solid wall of cars waiting for a green light at the intersection of Elm and Main I was only about thirty feet back of the car and coming up fast. My gun was out and in my right hand.

Weasel could see easy enough he wouldn't have a chance if he tried a run for it then, so he just sat there and tried to look like an innocent citizen.

"Out," I yelled. "Get out and put your hands on the top of that car.

Snap to it! Jump! On the double!"

Weasel knew the routine all right, but he was playing innocent. "What's the trouble, officer? Have I done something?"

"Out!" I yelled again.

His eyes flicked over me. He saw the gun. He also saw my high badge number, 979, and that told him I was still a rookie. I guess Weasel knew how rookies can get nervous in a pinch.

"Uncock that cannon," he squealed at me. "It's all some awful mistake, but I'm getting out. Whatever you say, Sergeant. Just don't get careless with that thing. I'm not armed." He got out and leaned on the car top.

Three blocks down the street the alarm siren was still screaming at the store. Only a block away there was another intermittent screaming, which was Sol Abrams coming up the sidewalk at a dead run. For a short, middle-aged, overweight character, Sol was doing fine. Don't ever underrate the owner of a stolen \$65,000 diamond and ruby brooch. Like the headshrinkers say, he has *motivation!*

A block behind Sol, still a third scream was getting into the act. This one was the siren on Brodie and Minko's prowler car, trying to butt its way through traffic.

Abrams got there first. "My diamond!" he screeched. "Quick, Of-

ficer, just give me the diamond." Then he went white as chalk, even the bald top of his head. He reeled and grabbed onto the car top to hold himself up while he wheezed and tried to get some breath back into his lungs.



"Hold it," I said. Then, to the other drivers, "Get those cars out of here. Move along now. It's all over."

They just sat there looking pop-eyed and a lot guiltier than Weasel. I nudged Weasel with the gun to stop any ideas about melting into the confusion.

Minko and Sgt. Brodie left their car immobilized in traffic down

the block and came pelting up. Minko took in the scene with the instinct of a born detective and slapped his own .38 police positive against Sol's kidney.

"I've got this one," he yelled. "What have they done, Shedboldt?"

"All that one's done," I explained, "is to run himself just about into a heart attack. Let him go, Minko, that's Sol Abrams, the one whose store was just robbed."

"Why, so it is! I recognize him myself now. And mind you speak more respectful to your seniors in the future, rookie."

"This other lad here is Weasel Enko," Brodie told us. "His face is on posters at the station. An ugly face it is, too."

"Mind your manners, Sergeant," Weasel said peevishly. "Just keep in mind I got constilational rights."

"So you have, to be sure." The sergeant fished around in his pocket for the printed card that was standard issue these days. When he couldn't find it, I passed him mine, and he held it out at arm's length and read the whole thing at the top of his voice.

"Whew!" said a listening citizen. "Just fancy all that. Do you fellows have to apologize to him now, Officer?"

"Shut up," Minko told him. "Either shut up or move on."

"Don't stand for that, Henry,"

the citizen's wife put in. "You have constitutional rights too, you know."

Minko's face got red, but Henry hushed her up. I guess he figured rights could be stretched just so far.

Meanwhile Sgt. Brodie got down to business. "If this is the man you saw run out of the store, patrolman," he said to me, "you may as well go ahead and frisk him for evidence."

"I want a lawyer," Weasel said.

"You'll get one," I told him, "but not now. Just keep your hands up out of the way while I look."

The first thing I found in his jacket pocket was a blue jeweler's box. "My diamond brooch!" Sol yelled and grabbed for it.

"Hold on there," Sgt. Brodie said. "That's evidence. Let Officer Shedboldt open it first."

I did. Inside was a big, heart-shaped gold locket engraved in an old-fashioned style. Inside the locket was a faded photo of a fat, naked baby and the engraved words, "Little Walter—1919." "Is that you, Weasel?" I asked in near shock.

"My diamonds, you fool," Sol squealed, his voice high and thin with emotion. "That ain't any \$65,000 brooch. Find my diamonds. Find them right now!"

"Sorry," I said. "It just caught me by surprise."

I went through the rest of Weasel's pockets. It was like a grab bag. The citizens stood around and gawked at each item as I produced it.

Weasel didn't seem worried a bit—and that worried me. I'd been studying in hopes of applying for promotion to detective, and I knew he was too cocky for a man in the spot he was in. He should have been worried, but he wasn't. I began to suspect Weasel had everything up his sleeve *but* a diamond brooch. A quick frisk could turn up no brooch, either on his person or in the car.

As the search went on Sol Abrams got louder and wilder. At first he kept yelling at Weasel to give up and produce the brooch. Then he started to plead with him.

Weasel seemed to get a big kick out of all this. "I never had no diamonds," he said at last. "Wish I did own some. Why don't you search the cop? He could have lifted somethin' offa me before you got here." The idea amused him.

It didn't seem to amuse Sol. Part of his mind knew it wasn't so, but he was so excited the other part half-believed it might be. He looked at me, and I could see suspicion in his eyes.

One of the citizens stopped him. "The officer never got that close," he told us. "I been here the whole

time. He just pointed his cannon at this here runt."

"Whadda ya mean, runt?" Weasel said. "Come on, Cap," to Sgt. Brodie, "let's either cut the comedy act or sell tickets. How about all those rights of mine, you read to me? I want to call my lawyer. That's what I want."

Sgt. Brodie thought it over. "Okay, boys," he pronounced finally. "We better all go down to the station now. Minko, you drive the little car here. Shedboldt, you and I'll take Mister Enko and his rights and Mr. Abrams and this witness (he put his finger on the citizen who'd spoken up) in the police car. Let's go now. Let's go."

Everybody talked at once. The citizen didn't want to go. He said he was a close friend of the mayor. Minko wanted to handcuff him to Weasel. Sol kept on babbling about his diamonds. Weasel asked again for his lawyer.

Finally I got Brodie's attention. "Sergeant," I said, "I saw this fellow come out of the store. I remember now. He put something in the mailbox right in front of the door. I saw him clear enough. Don't you think that might be it?"

"Of course," Brodie snapped at me. "Why didn't you speak up before? Probably where he put his gun too. You go back and stay right by that box. The captain will

phone the post office to send somebody down and empty the box and bring everything over to the station house. You come right with it. While we wait, we'll give this bucko and his car a really good searching. One way or the other, we'll be sure to find what we want. And tell one of Sol's clerks to turn off that fool siren."

I went back to the box and holstered in to the clerks to shut off the alarm. They said they didn't know how. That was when the private guard service finally drove up. They knew how.

Then it took ten minutes for the sergeant to get traffic unsnarled up at the intersection. Finally they drove off. I stood by the mailbox and tried to look important without looking as if I was trying. You probably know what I mean. Clerks came out of the stores on the block and fussed over me. I could see myself filling out that application for detective. Now I had something really solid to put down. I'd done what every rookie dreams about. I'd made the big pinch and right out in the open where nobody else could grab the credit.

My relief on post showed up just about the same time as the supervisor from the post office. He opened the box with his key, and we put everything inside into a

regular mail sack and locked the sack. I spotted what I thought was the right package right off the bat. The supervisor wouldn't even let me shake it, though. "Later," he said. "All in good time."

We put the sack in his official government car, and he drove me over to headquarters. All the way I kept telling myself things were okay now.

The post office man, after I told him the story, didn't seem to think so. "Wanna bet there's no diamonds in this bag?" he asked. "Probably we'll find his gun, but I think that'll be all. No diamond brooch."

"How do you figure that?"

"I just try to think like the crook. It's a habit of mine. I read detective stories. First of all, when he put whatever he did in here he'd heard the alarm, but not seen you yet. He didn't know he'd be nabbed right off. This whole job was figured for a quiet, easy get-away. He'd want to keep the diamonds on him that way. And from what you say these types stick to a plan once it's been made. On the other hand, he'd plan in advance to dump the gun once he'd made his hit. That's what I bet we'll find in this here bag."

"I sure hope you're wrong, mister," I said mournfully.

"Oh, cheer up, buddy. The

stones are probably some place in his car."

When we got to the station house we found out. He was right on the first count and wrong on the second. Isn't it always the way when you need a break?

Once we opened the mail bag, the package Weasel had dropped stood out like a sore thumb. There was a small package addressed to an A.P.O. number *and* the one we wanted. This was small and fastened around the middle with twine, but lengthwise tied only with a piece of black elastic. One end of the box had been cut out and the hole covered with three thicknesses of heavy brown paper held in place by the elastic.

The address told us nothing. It was to "J. Brown" at a P.O. box number in Seattle, Wash. The postal man gave us permission to look inside readily enough.

Weasel was in the room when we opened the package. The whole thing just seemed to amuse him. "I never seen that in my life," he told us. "Whoever wrapped that thing was a nut. Anybody could spot it for a drop. I ain't that dumb. You'll see."

We saw. The package held Weasel's pistol wrapped in the gloves and stocking mask. Besides these, there was only some crumpled newspaper. The lab failed to

find a fingerprint anywhere on the gun. The cloth items weren't even dusted. He must have used a handkerchief to handle the package. No prints. No hits. No runs. No way to prove Weasel had even touched the thing. With today's rules of evidence we were in a bad way. We might make a good circumstantial case, but that was all.

Besides, as Sol Abrams kept reminding us, we still hadn't found the stolen brooch. "My diamonds," he kept saying. "Why doesn't somebody find my diamonds? I don't care what happens to this bum. I just want my diamonds."

"Yeah," Weasel said with a sneer, "somebody took this guy's diamonds. I never seen them. Why don't you big heroes go and catch whoever did?"

Captain Harrigan told him to shut up.

Weasel had already been stripped and searched. He'd even been fluoroscoped in case he'd swallowed the brooch. No dice.

We all went downstairs together to the garage. By now the whole thing was beginning to take on nightmare overtones for me. I could see the promotion flying out the window and a string of demerits flying in. I felt sicker by the minute.

In the garage Weasel's little foreign bug was half hidden by

mechanics, detectives, and the boys from the lab. The seats were out and the panels taken off the doors. They were even taking the motor apart, though I could tell them he hadn't even tried to open the hood. The boys were being thorough, all right, but it all seemed to be wasted effort.

One of the detectives came over to us. "Nothing yet, Captain," he said. "If it's here, we'll find it."

"What's all that?" Sgt. Harrigan pointed to a pile of objects on the cement floor near the car.

"Stuff out of the back seat and luggage compartment. Mostly junk—old clothes, paper bags, rags, the jack, a couple of wrenches, a busted fishing reel, old newspapers, stuff like that. It's all been gone over. No diamonds."

"Oh, okay." The sergeant was satisfied.

By the time we got back upstairs Weasel's lawyer had come into the building. He told his client to shut up and stay that way. He also told the captain, "I'll have this man out of here just as soon as I can find Judge Miller and get him to set bail. Any argument?"

"No argument." There was nothing else the captain could say.

He could say plenty, though, when he got me in his private office. "Shedboldt," he said.

"Yes, Captain."

"Shedboldt, I have been watching rookies come and go for thirty-eight years now, but I have never seen one pull this big a blooper. I never want to see it again. Do you read me?"

"Yes, Captain."

"Have you any excuses? I try to be fair."

"No, Captain."

"What?"

"I mean yes, Captain, you're fair. No, Captain, no excuses. I swear I had him in sight the whole time. He *couldn't* have passed the brooch to anybody. I was watching him, and I was closing in all the time."

"Could he have tossed it to somebody?"

"Not without my noticing. He went right to the car and got in. The car was on my side of the street. His body and arms weren't masked at any time."

"How about after he got in the car. He could have thrown a small object to somebody on the sidewalk, couldn't he?"

I had to think about that one. "No, Captain, I don't think he could. For one thing, that car's so small he'd have had to put his arm out the window to throw any distance. He didn't. For another thing, he was in the third lane from the right hand curb. Elm St. is one-way there, with two parking

lanes and four traffic lanes. He had a line of parked cars and a line of moving cars between him and the curb on the nearest side. Besides, he wasn't expecting to need a confederate. He'd planned to put Sol out for long enough to drive away slow and easy. No, I don't think he threw it to anybody."

"Shedboldt, I want you to think." The captain's voice was very patient now. "I hear you want to be a detective. Now let's see if you can *think* like a detective. Think, man, think. We know we've got the right man. We also know he's not a magician. I believe you when you say you had him in sight the whole time. If so, there must be something you've overlooked."

"Yes, Captain."

"Go back and think, Shedboldt. Go over everything that happened from the moment the alarm sounded. There *must* be something you've missed."

I stood there feeling like a fool. I tried to think like a detective, whatever that meant. When the alarm went off I'd been standing at the curb batting trash into the storm sewer.

Way in the back of my head a little light went on. Slowly it grew brighter and brighter. "Captain," I said, "I've got an idea. It just might be it."

"It better be!" Brodie growled. Captain Harrigan shushed him.

"He couldn't have thrown the brooch out of the car, Captain, without my seeing him, but he could have *dropped* it. He could have dropped it over the door on the side away from me."

Brodie snorted. "In the middle of Elm Street? You're crazy, Shedboldt. Somebody would see it and call us or run off with it."

"They would," I said, "if they saw a diamond brooch. Maybe he hid it. He had to improvise, of course, but he could have fixed it so they didn't see a brooch. They saw something else instead—something not worth noticing."

Captain Harrigan proved why he was made a captain in the first place. "Come on," he said. "We'll take my car. I hope you're right,

boy. You have a whole lot to lose."

We found what I was looking for in the middle of the second block Weasel had driven. Cars were zipping by it on both sides—but nobody but me was looking for a battered old tennis sneaker, the usual one old shoe in the street. The brooch was in the toe, stuffed in behind a crumpled sheet of paper. The paper had his prints, and there was a partial on the face of the Star of Ishtar itself. The mate to the shoe was in the pile of junk taken from Weasel's car. We had the brooch *and* we had a case.

At least one car had gone over the shoe. The gold brooch was mashed out of shape, but the stones were okay. Sol wants to give me a reward.

I'm sure now. I want to be a detective.

~~~~~  
*Dear Fans:*

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*Membership dues are one dollar. (Please do not send stamps.) Fan Club members will receive an autographed photo of Mr. Hitchcock, his biography, and a bulletin of current news, issued four times a year. All mail should be addressed to:*

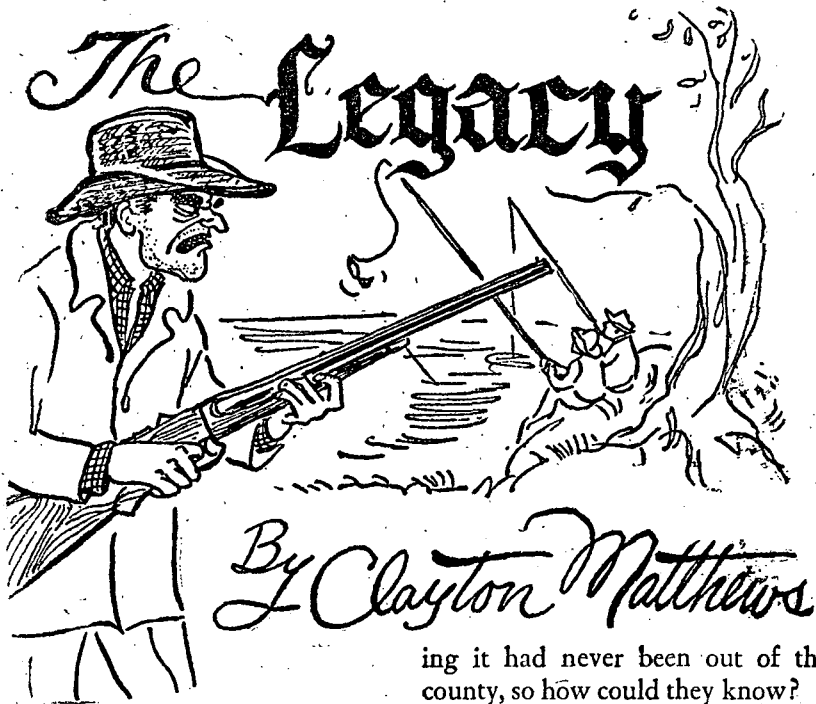
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*I want to thank all of you for your interest.*

*Most sincerely,*

*Pat Hitchcock*

*In accord with Shakespeare's, "Some griefs are med'cinable," I hasten to add that the individual must seek his own palliative.*



**M**Y UNCLE Leroy was the meanest man in all of Conroe County. Everybody said so. Some even said he was the meanest man alive but as Sheriff Jason Little always pointed out when that was said in front of him, this statement was a little loose since many of those say-

ing it had never been out of the county, so how could they know?

"Not that Leroy Collins isn't a mean man," Sheriff Jason would add with his spare grin. "I'm not downgrading him in that respect. I've told him to his face any number of times, for all the good it did."

Actually Sheriff Jason was only a deputy, the sheriff being over at

the county seat, but he was the only law in our little east Texas town. His hardest chore usually was that of separating two rambunctious Saturday night drunks.

I came to live with my Uncle Leroy and Aunt Aggie when I was just ten, after my folks were killed in an automobile accident. Aunt Aggie was my mother's sister, and it was either live with them or be sent off to an orphanage.

"I couldn't live with myself if I let Kyle be sent to an orphanage," Aunt Aggie said. "Not my sister's only child."

I don't think my uncle would have agreed to it except he thought he might get an extra farmhand for room and board. He got a bad bargain in me. I was never any good around a farm. Take just one instance. I could never learn to milk a cow. The only way I could get milk was by using the thumb and forefinger and that took forever. Uncle Leroy roared and stomped and took a strap to me but I didn't improve, not even after four years.

Where my uncle was mean and sour, Aunt Aggie was kind, gentle as she could be. Where he was tall, lean as a cadaver, always scowling, and smelling of the barn, Aunt Aggie was slight, always had a smile for me, and

smelled of freshly baked biscuits and cornbread. She wasn't what you'd call pretty, at least not when I first saw her. She was well past forty then, of course, and she looked careworn, her brown hair already streaked with gray. The things I remember best about her were her kind smile, the gentle stroke of her fingers in my hair, the soft croon of her voice.

They didn't have any children of their own. When I was old enough to look back I realized I could easily have been spoiled, since Aunt Aggie doted on me. My uncle saw to it that I wasn't. If she was especially good to me, he found a reason to use his strap. As well as being naturally mean, he was miserly. I wore clothes to school until they looked like a patchwork quilt before he'd buy me something new. Aunt Aggie made as many of my clothes as she could. The only Christmas presents I ever received were things she made for me.

It wasn't that he couldn't afford it. He had one hundred and sixty acres of rich river bottom land and almost every square inch of it was cultivated, except for the pond and some timber around it.

The pond was one reason folks named him mean. Actually it was more a lake than a pond, large in size and quite deep. The way Sheriff Jason told it to me, Aunt Ag-

gie's father, whose farm it had been before he died, had kept the pond stocked with fish and let anyone who wished fish there. Uncle Leroy charged folks a dollar, and anyone he caught fishing without paying the dollar he ran off with a shotgun.

Sheriff Jason had the farm to the south of us, eighty acres. He let most of it stay idle, spending a great deal of his time in town sheriffing.

Uncle Leroy despised him, calling him lazy and shiftless. "It's purely a sin the way that man runs a place. A man like Jason Little shouldn't even own a farm."

Aunt Aggie would reply, "Jason and his sister are comfortable. They want for nothing. They raised two boys on that farm after Jason's Martha died. Jason says he works hard enough to satisfy their needs."

"You always was soft for that man," Uncle Leroy grumbled. "I reckon you'd have married him if I hadn't—"

Aunt Aggie's color heightened. "Hush now! Don't go talking that old foolishness in front of Kyle."

"I like most everybody," Sheriff Jason was fond of saying, "but I can't find it in me to like Leroy Collins. He's a hard worker, I'll hand him that, and I reckon that's a virtue with many folks. The way

I see it, hard work is a way some folks have of working off their meanness."

Sheriff Jason was plump and drawling, bald as an apple. He didn't have an office, so weekdays he drove the mile into town in his old Model A and spent most of the day on an upended pop box at the filling station, sucking on an old black pipe and yarning. Those men not engaged in weekday pursuits, and some who were, would drop by and visit. In those days Scattergood Baines was a favorite fictional character, certainly one of mine, and I came to think of Sheriff Jason as our town's Scattergood Baines, sitting on his pop box, dispensing wisdom, settling problems and spinning outrageous yarns.

I often stopped by the filling station on my way home from school, even knowing that I'd be late doing my chores and in danger of a whack from Uncle Leroy's strap. Most times Sheriff Jason would drive me as far as his house, which was only a quarter mile from home, and always insisted I stop in for cookies and a glass of milk. Later, I realized Sheriff Jason was lonely. His own two boys were grown and living several counties away.

Beth Little was Sheriff Jason's sister and kept house for him; she was small and bustling and sharp

of tongue. Sheriff Jason's wife had died when his second son was born, and his sister had moved in to help raise the boys.

One afternoon when I'd stopped in Beth Little saw two buttons missing off my shirt. "Take that shirt off, Kyle, and I'll sew on those buttons while you have your cookies. Aggie has enough to do as it is."

I'd forgotten about the welts across my back until I heard her indrawn breath. "What happened to your back, boy? Has that Leroy Collins been beating you?"

I mumbled something and turned away, but Sheriff Jason took me by the arm and spun me around so my back was to him. "Darn that man!" he said fiercely. "Does he beat you often?"

I felt a flood of shame. "Sometimes. When I don't do my chores right."

"That man ought to be horse-whipped himself," Beth Little said, bristling. "Why don't you do something, Jason?"

"What would you have me do?"

"You're the sheriff, ain't you?"

"That doesn't cut any ice. It's not sheriff business. The boy's Aggie's kin. I haven't been in that house since she married Leroy and I'd not be welcome. Now if she'd make a complaint—"

"You know she'd never do that.

Aggie's a proud woman, too proud for her own good. She made her mistake and she'll live with it until she dies. When I think that that man wouldn't have a dime if he hadn't married Aggie and her already with that farm!"

My bedroom was a small, slant-roofed room on the second floor, directly over the kitchen. Only the lower floor was heated, all the heat for the upstairs rooms coming through grillwork vents in the floor, and when the fall nights turned chilly I often sprawled close to the vent while doing my homework. Usually my aunt and uncle went into the parlor after supper, where he read the paper and she sewed, but sometimes they stayed in the kitchen awhile or came out for a snack. I could hear every word spoken, but seldom heard anything interesting. They had little to say to one another besides the words needed for day-to-day living.

One evening about a week after I'd learned from Beth Little that my uncle had married Aunt Aggie for the farm, I heard their voices raised in anger.

"Adopt him! You must be out of your mind, woman! I was never for having him here in the first place. Now you want to go and adopt him!"

"He's my sister's child and

should have folks of his very own."

"We're folks enough, worthless as he is around the place. We go and make him our legal kid and the place'd go to him anything should happen to us. I wouldn't put it past you to try and leave it to him anyway, you happen to go before me."

"That's all you ever think about, this farm!"

"Somebody'd better."

"Sometimes I think that's the only reason you married me."

"You *think*! For what other reason, I'd like to know?" His laughter was cruel, taunting. "Certainly not for your looks or your brains."

"Well, I'm going to adopt Kyle!"

"Not so long as I'm alive and have anything to say about it, and you'd have to have me agree to it. Now just shut up about it."

"You've got no right—"

"I've got every right!"

There was the sound of a slap, a cry from Aunt Aggie, followed by the heavy tread of his footsteps leaving the kitchen. Then the only sound I heard was Aunt Aggie's muffled sobs.

I suppose I'd hated him from the beginning, certainly from the first strapping he'd given me, but I'd never put voice to it before. Lying there beside the vent, school-books forgotten, I clenched my fists and thumped my thighs as

hard as I could. I whispered, "I hate him! I'll kill him!"

Aunt Aggie had never been very big, but now she seemed to get smaller and smaller. Her face gaunted until it was little more than a skull with the skin stretched tight over it. Her brown eyes sank into deep pits and her hands thinned down until the blue veins showed like wires under the transparent skin. She moved slowly and was often late with meals, her head bowing under my uncle's vocal displeasure. Often I would hear her pacing the floor late at night, sometimes moaning softly. She didn't eat enough to keep a bird alive.

If my uncle noticed it, he didn't say anything. Maybe he was happy about it. Maybe he was even poisoning her!

One day at Sheriff Jason's house, his sister said, "Kyle, is your aunt feeling poorly? I stopped in today, making sure first that that man was in the fields. Aggie looked like death."

I burst out, "Uncle Leroy's poisoning her!"

"Whoa now, boy," Sheriff Jason said quietly. "Let's not go off half-cocked."

"Maybe the boy's right, Jason."

He took my arm and turned me to face him. "You have any reason to back up what you say, Kyle?"

"She's sickly, always having to lie down, and she hardly ever sleeps at night."

"Well . . . Aggie's health has never been what you'd call good."

"If he hurts Aunt Aggie, I'll kill him!" I threatened.

"Well, now, I reckon you've reason not to like him but . . . How old are you now, Kyle?"

"Going on fourteen."

"And big for your age, too. But a little young to be talking of killing. Besides . . ." His craggy face grew still and cold. "If Leroy Collins does anything to Aggie, he'll rue the day!"

"Does anything?" his sister echoed. "It'll be too late then."

"What can I do, sis?" His voice was agonized. "Tell me, what can I do?"

A week later I overheard another conversation from the kitchen. They were talking as they came in.

". . . and he's sure?"

"He's sure," Aunt Aggie said. "That's why I want to adopt Kyle."

"I thought I told you to shut up about that."

"But things are different now! I want to see that he's taken care of."

"I'll see that he's taken care of." His laughter grated. "And I can't see that things are any different. With you maybe. Not with me."

"You're a mean man, Leroy Collins!"

"So folks keep telling me but you don't notice me losing any sleep over it, do you? What folks say about me never did bother me much."

"I'll never know why I married you."

"Why, you loved me and couldn't live without me. Don't you recollect?"

"I was wrong. I hate you!" she said in a low, intense voice.

"Hate away," he said carelessly, "but that kid's not getting any of this place so long as I'm alive. And there's not a blasted thing you can do about it."

"There *is* something I can do."

"What? Run to Jason Little? Run ahead. He's good at telling folks what to do."

"He's a better man than you are by far."

I heard the sound of a slap, a cry from Aunt Aggie, followed by a thump. Without even thinking about it, I was out of the room and down the narrow stairs. He was just coming through the kitchen door and I flew at him. Yelling hoarsely, "I'll kill you!" I hammered on his chest with my fists.

His long face was ludicrous with surprise, then flushed with anger. He gave me a stinging slap across the mouth, and the blow

sent me crashing against the wall. I slid down to the floor, half-stunned.

He loomed over me, his face dark with rage. "You come at me again like that, kid, and I'll strap



you within an inch of your life!"

From the doorway Aunt Aggie cried, "You leave him alone!"

He whirled, took two steps toward her, then turned on his heel and strode out into the night.

Aunt Aggie crossed the room to me as I struggled to my feet, and she folded me into her arms.

"I'm sorry, Aunt Aggie," I gulped.

"There, there, Kyle. It's all right. It's all right."

I came straight home from school the next afternoon, without

stopping in at the filling station.

That evening I burst in on Sheriff Jason and his sister in their kitchen, with the news, "Uncle Leroy has left! He can't hurt Aunt Aggie anymore!"

Sheriff Jason stared. "Whoa now, boy. What's this all about?"

"He just packed up and left. And he won't ever be back!"

Sheriff Jason exchanged looks with his sister. "That don't sound like the Leroy Collins I know."

"Jason, you'd better—"

He got to his feet. "Yes, I reckon I'd better."

He went with me back to the farm. I was hurting to talk, but Sheriff Jason kept a brooding silence.

Aunt Aggie was reclining on the divan in the parlor, wan and tired looking. She gave Sheriff Jason a pale smile. "Jase . . . It's been a long time."

"Yes, Aggie. Too long." He went to her and took her hand for a moment, then dropped it and pulled up a chair, facing her. "Now, what's this about Leroy up and leaving?"

"Well, we'd been fighting about me adopting Kyle and . . ." Aunt Aggie turned to me and said, "There's cake in the kitchen, Kyle. You go have a piece and a glass of milk."

"Go on along, boy," Sheriff Ja-



son said without a glance at me.

I went with dragging feet. Once out of sight in the hall, I sneaked back to the door and listened shamelessly.

"... down by the pond clearing timber all morning. He's been working down there some weeks and I always carried his lunch down—"

"In your condition?"

"—and we started in again. You see, Jase, I wanted to make Kyle legally mine so he could get his share of the farm after I'm gone. Leroy wouldn't agree to it, so I finally told him to get out. He packed his things and left."

"That doesn't sound much like Leroy. You're sure that's the way it was, Aggie? I know how Kyle feels about him, and he's been making some wild threats. You sure he didn't—"

"Oh, no, Jase! Leroy was gone long before Kyle came home from school. He went walking down the road. That's the way I first saw him, remember? Walking toward the house carrying an old suitcase. He went carrying the same suitcase, in fact."

Sheriff Jason said slowly, "Yes, I remember, Aggie."

"I was a fool, Jase." Her voice had a choked sound. "If I had married you when you asked me ... All those good years we've

wasted, Jase. They're all gone!"

"We all make mistakes. We can whip ourselves to death with ifs." His voice had softened, now it changed again. "But it doesn't make sense, his walking away from all this."

"I told him if he didn't I'd drive him out, take him to court if I had to."

"But why now? Why after all these years?"

"Everything's different now. Long as I knew I'd be here to see to Kyle's legacy, it didn't matter much. I'd long ago stopped loving him, if I ever had, but he was a man around to take care of the place, mean as he was. But all that changed."

"Changed how, Aggie?"

I heard her heavy sigh. "I didn't want to tell people but I have to tell you, Jase, so you'll see to Kyle. I went to a doctor last week. A few months at the most he gave me. . . ."

I fled from the sound of her voice. I stood in the kitchen, with my eyes clenched shut, weak tears squeezing past the lids.

Aunt Aggie took to her bed soon after that. Beth Little moved in to take care of us, and Sheriff Jason spent almost as much time there as at home. He did all the heavy chores around the place and helped me with mine. With him

showing me, I became more handy doing farm chores, except I never did learn how to milk a cow properly. Every time I'd try, I would think of Uncle Leroy and his strap.

"Never mind, boy," Sheriff Jason said. "There're people grow up all the time who never learn to milk a cow."

Sheriff Jason didn't laugh as much as he once had, didn't yarn as much, but he was still at the filling station most afternoons to drive me home.

One Indian summer afternoon several men were grouped around him at the station. They didn't see me right away, and I heard one man say, "Don't see how you can be so all-fired sure the boy had nothing to do with it, Jason. Not that I could blame him, but right's right!"

Sheriff Jason said, "If you don't like the way I do my job, Pete—"

"Didn't say that," the man grumbled. "I just think it's almighty queer, the whole thing."

Sheriff Jason saw me then and motioned the man quiet. He stood up and said heartily, "Kyle! You ready to head out home?"

A doctor came to the farm every day now. I was seldom allowed in to see Aunt Aggie. Each time I did see her, she seemed smaller than the time before, her voice little more than a whisper. Late at

night I could hear her crying out in pain; could hear Beth Little bustling in and out of her room.

One afternoon after I got home from school, a strange man came to the house; a lawyer, I later learned. He went into Aunt Aggie's room with Sheriff Jason and his sister, and they were in there for a long time with the door closed. While Beth Little was seeing the lawyer out, Sheriff Jason stayed behind in my aunt's room. I lurked in the doorway, listening, neither of them noticing me.

"I'd like to marry you, Aggie."

Aunt Aggie's weak voice took on a sudden lilt. "No, Jase. It's way too late for that. But thank you for offering. I can go happy now. Kyle's in my will, and the farm will go to him. I want you to promise me you'll take care of him until he's old enough."

Sheriff Jason said, "You have my solemn promise, Aggie."

Aunt Aggie died a week later.

Sheriff Jason took me home with him after the funeral and gave me a bedroom upstairs. "Aggie made me your legal guardian, Kyle, as well as the executor of her will. The farm will be yours when you're of voting age. Until then you're to live with me. I'll operate the farm and whatever profits there are will go toward sending you to college, the rest put into a

trust. You'll never have a worry."

They didn't wake me the day after the funeral, and I slept past nine o'clock. When I did finally get up I went to the bedroom window and looked out. From there I could see the pond clearly. What I saw gave me a fearful start. Men were swarming around it like ants.

I hurried into my clothes and clattered downstairs. As I charged through the kitchen on my way to the back door, Beth Little stepped in my path.

"And just where do you think you're going?"

"A lot of men are over at the pond! I have to get over there!"

"You'll do no such thing. Jason told me to keep you in today. Now, you just sit down and have your breakfast."

It was the longest day of my life. Late in the afternoon, again from my bedroom window, I saw Sheriff Jason coming across the fields toward the house. I hurried down the stairs and into the kitchen, where Beth Little was fixing supper. I said excitedly, "Sheriff Jason's coming!"

She went to the window and looked out. "I see he is."

Sheriff Jason spent several minutes on the back porch, scraping the mud off his boots. His glance found me at once when he came in.

"Well?" his sister questioned.

He nodded, without taking his gaze off me.

Beth Little turned to me. "Kyle, go to your room."

"No, sis," he said sharply. "He'll have to know. Now's as good a time as any. He should know the price of his legacy." He sighed and squared his shoulders. "Boy, we just dragged the pond. Found Leroy Collins, with his head bashed in. I swear, sick as she was, I don't know where she found the strength. Funny thing, he was caught in the roots of one of the trees where it had growed out into the water; one of those trees he was aiming to chop down."

"You knew all the time," his sister said accusingly.

"Not all the time. I suspicioned but I didn't know. Aggie told me just before she died."

"And you're the sheriff!"

"What would you have had me do, sis? She was dying. What more could the law have done to her?"

"But why now? You didn't do anything when she told you, why loose the dogs after she's dead and buried? Why didn't you just leave him down there?"

"Why, I figured he had a decent burial coming," Sheriff Jason said simply. "Even a man as mean as Leroy Collins had that much coming to him."

*Readiness may be described as a case of instant preparation directly related to hunger.*

The  
Albermarle

TRIGGER

**B**EN FARRELL let the phone ring several times before he picked it up. Why give the impression he'd been sitting on it? "Farrell Law Office." Very crisply. "Farrell speaking."

"You make it sound big," laughed the familiar voice of Jack Weisman, former college classmate who had ducked the uncertainties of private practice by becoming a deputy D.A.

"It will sound bigger when you hear the echo," Farrell said.

"Good, Ben. Then you're not too busy to listen to me."

Farrell sighed. Ever since graduation and bar exams Weisman had been at him to come into the D.A.'s

office, but Farrell couldn't forget that once he'd nearly been sentenced on a mistaken manslaughter charge. He couldn't become a deputy prosecutor and have nightmares, wondering if he'd secured convictions of innocent defendants.

"If it's the same old argument, give it up," he said curtly. "I'll stick it out here."

"Starve it out," Weisman retorted. "Don't hang up, Ben. I called about a case you're to handle, right away, in opposition to me, before Judge McDaniel."

"McDaniel?" Farrell was puzzled. D.A.s usually operated in criminal courts. This was civil. "What are you doing there?"

"Civil insanity case," Weisman replied. "The defendant—or rather, *patient*, as they're called in these cases—still has enough marbles left to demand a jury trial on the petition of relatives who want her put away. That requires someone from



the D.A.'s to present the facts for the state."

"I haven't got that rusty sitting here," Farrell said. "But I can't see how it concerns me. If she can't afford an attorney, McDaniel will get someone from the Public Defenders Bureau."

"The Bureau hasn't got a defender available, and won't have for some time. This case would have to be continued way over in his honor's heavy calendar. That wouldn't be fair to the patient, so I suggested you to McDaniel and he's agreed to appoint you, if available."

The fee, small, would be welcome, yet Farrell sensed there

wouldn't be much chance to exercise his inexperienced talents. It sounded like mere formality for the sake of appearances in the trial of the patient.

"Thanks for suggesting me, but it's not a fair shake for the defendant—the patient. I don't know a thing about her or her case."

"It's not that involved," Weisman urged. "You'll get the drift fast. You can still think on your feet, can't you?"

"I hope so. But confidentially, Jack, just how do *you* feel about the setup? It strikes me that the decision is already stacked."

"Then why the hesitation?" Weisman demanded pointedly. "Maybe she needs someone, like you did once, to prove—if you can—that she's innocent, shouldn't be committed to the nut-house. Well?"

"Okay," he said reluctantly, "tell the patient her hungry dog is coming."

By the time he reached the Civil Courts Building he had deep qualms. He should have remembered that Weisman was an opportunist, a climber, and wouldn't pass along a case to someone who might cost him a victory.

The deputy D.A., short, blond, was pacing like a fighter outside the courtroom doors. "Shake hands now," he grinned, "and come out fighting."

Farrell eyed him. "Now lead me to the slaughter."

"Thanks for the compliment, Ben, but I'm not going to give you a bad time. I'm about as green as you are. D.A.s don't waste experienced deputies on extracurricular cases like this."

Farrell checked himself from saying it wasn't extracurricular to the patient. Weisman probably didn't intend it to be that way in his record, either.

They went through the mahogany doors into the courtroom. Farrell was dismayed at the sight of twenty-odd people sitting outside the rail. He'd been hoping for little or no audience.

"Prospective jurors and the petitioning relatives," said Weisman, leading the way down the aisle before Farrell could inquire which was which. Eyes regarded him curiously. Then he spotted two men studying him intently from the D.A.'s end of the counsel table nearest the empty jury box.

"Not going to give me a bad time!" he muttered, going through the gate. "You brought a gang with you."

"Detectives," Weisman explained. "They merely picked her up on the petition made to the Psycho Department." Weisman grinned. "Of course they're hoping you'll lose."

The dicks stared without response as Farrell nodded grimly to them. He checked in with the court clerk. "Benjamin J. Farrell for the defense—for the patient."

The clerk nodded. "Her file is on the counsel table."

Farrell moved quickly to the table and untied a manila envelope. He went through its contents, getting only bits rather than the whole. Her name was Lucille Rogers. The petitioners were Mr. and Miss Rogers, in-laws. She must be a widow then, since he couldn't find any mention of a husband's name anywhere. He was about to scan the report of Dr. Rincon, psychiatrist, when the bailiff announced Judge McDaniel.

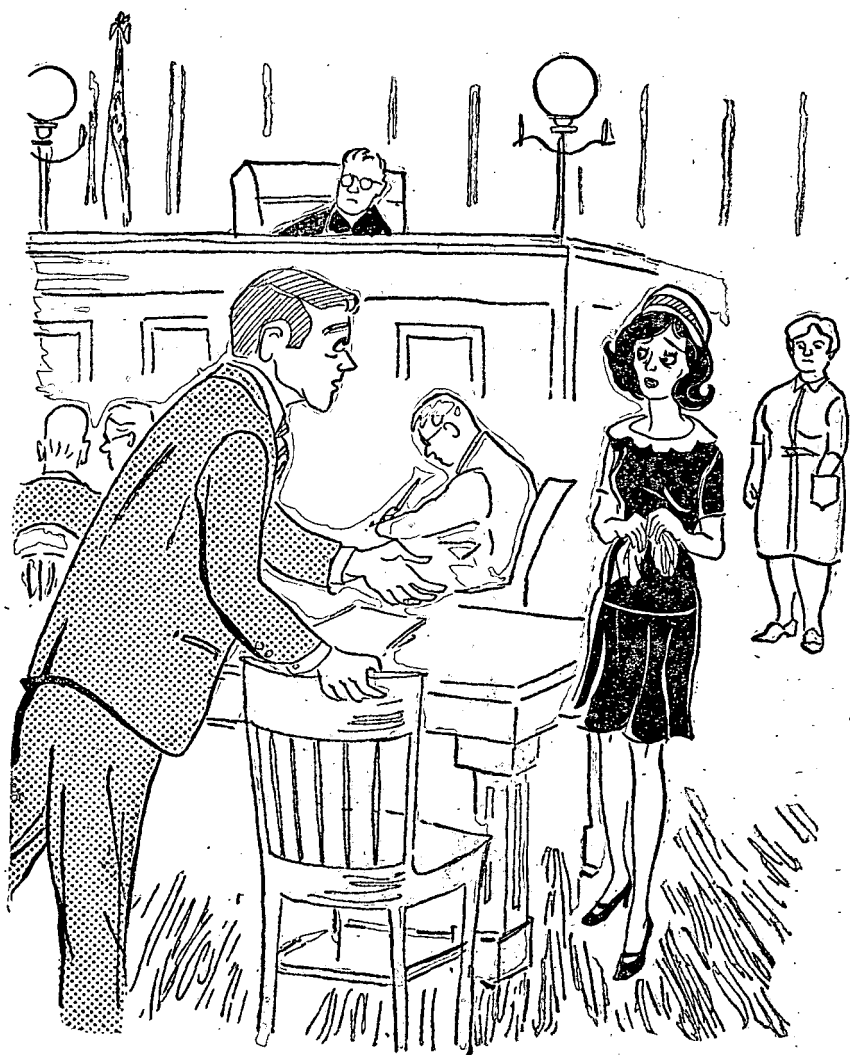
Farrell stood and faced the bench as the judge came in, his mouth, bags under eyes, and ear lobes all drooping like the badly fitting black robe. The judge glanced finally at Weisman and raised his eyebrows.

"Ready for the people," Weisman called out.

The eyebrows dropped. The judge turned toward Farrell. The eyebrows raised again.

"Ready for the patient," Farrell mumbled. Like hell he was!

The bailiff opened the detention pen. A matron, built like a wrestler, stood by. Farrell braced for trouble. Lucille Rogers came out



with quiet composure; about thirty; dark blue dress neither too revealing nor concealing; a white pillbox nested on her lustrous black hair. She clenched white

gloves very firmly in her hands.

As she passed the D.A.'s end of the table, she obviously avoided eye contact with Weisman or the detectives. She came toward Far-

rell, and he noted the fright in her large dark eyes, the circles of worry and fatigue. This, he wondered, was mentally ill? She paused, looking at him, almost afraid to smile slightly, to hope. He realized he was gaping at her.

"Sorry." He quickly pulled out a chair. "I'm Benjamin Farrell, your attorney. Did they tell you?"

"Yes." Studying him gravely, she sat down. "I won't be able to pay you, unless—"

"The court will take care of that."

"And me too," she said tonelessly. "I know I haven't got a chance."

Farrell's face felt hot. Had she made that hopeless decision just now, or before she met him? He looked her in the eyes, very personally.

"I was called in hurriedly, as you know. I haven't had time to study the . . . the case. You can either trust me to do my best, which I promise, or else it is a wait of weeks, perhaps months, before your case can come up again."

He fought back the impulse to place his hand on hers. Why hadn't he investigated more before agreeing he was available?

"Not that it will make much difference, but I'll trust you." She managed a faint smile.

He felt better, but not assured.

Judge McDaniel let the clerk have the eyebrow treatment. "Impanel the jury," he ordered.

Farrell felt uncertain about challenging the acceptability of any prospective juror. He might prejudice things for Lucille Rogers. He remained uneasily silent as Weisman challenged three men and got two of them replaced with women. Farrell didn't like those odds. Women always seemed tougher on a woman defendant, or patient. Maybe he'd been sitting in on the wrong types of cases. If he'd had time to study thoroughly the petition against Lucille Rogers, he might have had a hint of the male and female attitude to expect from the jury. He got up nerve enough to challenge one woman and get her replaced with a man. Finally, seven men and five women of varying ages and shapes filled the jury box.

Weisman spoke to the judge. "I'm satisfied with the jury."

The eyebrows lifted again.

Farrell leaned down by Lucille Rogers. "Are you satisfied?"

"You know best," she murmured.

He wondered at that. "We don't need a unanimous jury in a case like this," he explained uneasily. "Nine votes will be enough."

"I'm sorry," she said, "but it



doesn't make me any more hopeful."

The judge was clearing his throat impatiently. Farrell straightened slowly and said he was satisfied. The jury was sworn in. Then Weisman called the first witness: Miss Margaret Rogers.

"Your sister-in-law?" Farrell asked softly.

"She hates me," Lucille said tensely. "*She's* the one they should be—"

"Committing?" Farrell suggested. Lucille just bit her lip.

Farrell studied Miss Margaret Rogers. He saw gray hair drawn up carelessly under a bedraggled feathery hat; watery blue eyes with

a determined gleam; a fuzzy jutting chin and lips sucked in to a thin line, either because she didn't have all her teeth or had badly fitting dentures.

After the preliminary questions, Weisman figuratively stepped out of the ring and let the woman flail away at Lucille.

"She tricked my dead brother Sam into marrying her, his second wife, even though he was too old to marry again."

"She's lying," Lucille whispered vehemently.

Farrell gripped the arms of his chair, but was too uncertain of too many things to risk a clash with Weisman who had more court experience. He inclined his head toward Lucille.

"Suppose we just let her get out of line, then trip her up on cross-examination."

He didn't dare turn to see how his client took that.

"She tried to turn Sam against us," Margaret Rogers declared. "Against me and his twin brother Frank. She kept telling him we were cheating him on the property we all owned. And then, even though she *knew* he had a weak heart, she made him go out and check the crops on some farm property we owned. It's little wonder that on the way home he died of a heart attack in the car. She



killed him! No doubt about that!"

"Oh, no!" Lucille gasped.

Farrell started to get up. The sister-in-law raged on.

"And she had the gall to accuse me of killing him!"

Weisman cut in. "You weren't at the scene of the death?"

"Of course not. But she tried to say I poisoned—"

Weisman drowned her out. "Tell us about her other actions and attitudes toward you."

"Like I said, she was always trying to tell Sam we were cheating him. Then when I convinced Sam he had nothing to worry about, from us, I mean, she started trying to get me."

"How?" Weisman inquired, glancing at the jury.

"She knows I'm getting on in years, my bones are brittle, so she deliberately put things around the house for me to fall over. My home used to be neat as a pin. She's made a mess there in more ways than one."

Farrell caught the eye of a jury-woman, then smiled doubtfully as he glanced pointedly at his neatly clad client, then at the untidy witness. Weisman noticed him.

"In other words, Miss Rogers, you used to take pride in your home and personal appearance, but now—"

"What's the use? She's made

nervous wrecks of me and my brother, Frank, just by things like that, and by trying to turn him against me too."

"How did she attempt that?" Weisman asked.

"She'd softly call me into her room at night, saying she was sick. Then she'd scream bloody murder for Frank and try to make it look as though she were fighting me off. She's sick, all right, and doesn't belong loose where she can harm people who've tried to be good to her."

"Your witness," Weisman said to Farrell.

Lucille's fingers grasped Farrell's arm. She whispered angrily. "She did all the things she's accused me of doing."

Farrell determinedly cross-examined Margaret Rogers, but all he accomplished was to bring out more lurid details which he wished the jury hadn't heard.

Frank Rogers took the stand next. He corroborated his sister's testimony. He was an iron-gray man who sat at ease in the witness chair. His eyes were like chips of flagstone. He wouldn't be an easy man to tangle with or trip up, but Farrell had no choice. He had no witnesses for Lucille, and a scanning of the report of Dr. Rincon, the psychiatrist, made him feel as trapped as Lucille.

"Your witness," Weisman said.

Farrell rose slowly. Rogers would be expecting a frontal attack. Farrell decided to scout around, casually. Maybe he could find an opening somewhere else.

"Mr. Rogers, from the testimony of your sister and your own testimony, I take it that all of you—Miss Rogers, your brother Sam, and yourself—got on well together before the patient came into your lives?"

"Absolutely." The answer was direct, and positive.

"The jury," Farrell prompted, "might like to hear about it."

The iron-gray head nodded. The eyes softened in memory. "Just a happy family," Rogers said. "Margaret was our big sister, a pal, and like a second mother to us when we were kids. Ma was always poorly after Sam and I were born. It was kind of late for her to have us. She didn't last more than a year after Dad died. But Margaret was old enough to take over, hire help to run the farm, be our mother." Rogers smiled warmly at his sister.

"You said your mother was in poor health after you and your brother were born. You're . . . you were twins, right?"

"Identical twins. Looked alike, thought alike, acted alike. Even to a double wedding to identical

twins," Rogers said emphatically.

Farrell's understanding smile held a frown at bay. "What became of your wives? I mean, Sam's first wife?"

"They died, his wife and mine, when the house caught fire. That was during the war, right after it was thought that Sam and I had gone down together on a destroyer in the Pacific. I—I guess the girls, grief-stricken, got a little careless about a fireplace screen, or smoking or something, before they cried themselves to sleep . . . never to wake up again."

Farrell remained silent a moment in the hushed courtroom. "Until then, the two families, your brother's and yours, lived together under the same roof?"

"Why not? We all thought alike."

"Did your sister live elsewhere, or with you?"

"With us, of course, since she wasn't married."

"Of course," Farrell agreed slowly. "And she escaped from the fire, of course."

From the corner of his eye he saw Weisman lean forward intently. Frank Rogers stiffened. He snapped out his answer.

"She tried to get through the smoke and heat to awaken—"

"You mean," Farrell cut in, "that's what she *told* you."

"Her word was good enough

for us," Rogers retorted. "And neighbors told us how they had to restrain her." Rogers' eyes were stony. "Why don't you look up the police reports? They questioned her and believed her story too."

Weisman settled back. Blind alley, Farrell thought grimly. Outwardly, he tried to resume the casual manner.

"Are you in good health, Mr. Rogers?"

"Perfect."

Farrell paced a few steps, hoping he looked baffled.

"I don't understand that answer, Mr. Rogers. According to your sister's testimony, Sam had a weak heart. You're his identical twin, yet *you* haven't got a weak heart."

Rogers leaned back. "When the destroyer was bombed under, Sam was wounded, hurt bad around the heart." Farrell felt his own heart plop. "I wasn't hurt," Rogers went on. "I rescued him."

Another blind alley. Farrell glanced toward Lucille Rogers. She just stared at him as though reiterating her hopelessness. Farrell forced himself to face the witness again.

"Did you approve or disapprove of your brother's second marriage to Lucille?"

Rogers pressed his lips before he answered. "If that was going to make him happy, I was for it. But

it was kind of sudden, unexpected."

Farrell's voice sharpened. "Explain that please. What were the circumstances? What do you mean by sudden?"

"Well, he and I were no longer farming. We were buying and selling real estate. We looked at some farm property that she owned, inherited from her folks, she said."

"There needn't be any doubt about that," Farrell snapped. "A title search and other records would establish from whom and how she received the property. She owned it. Then what?"

"Well, she got on to it that we needed her property to complete a tract we were putting together, so she tried to drive a hard bargain. Sam saw her alone about it several times."

"Mr. Rogers, you and your brother wanted that property. He got it by marrying her. Isn't that a fact?"

"Well, I guess you could look at it that way."

Farrell looked knowingly at the jury. "Mr. Rogers, are you still in the real estate business?"

He was, and Farrell forced him to admit that through community property rights Lucille also shared title in the properties owned by the Rogers family.

"Therefore," Farrell suggested "if she has good cause to believe

you've been cheating her as you did her husband—"

Weisman was on his feet "Objection. That has not been established nor—"

Farrell wrangled with him before the judge sustained the objection. Sweating, Farrell confronted Rogers again.

"Since Lucille Rogers is constantly interfering in your real estate operations, it would be very convenient for you, wouldn't it, if she were declared mentally incompetent, unstable and were put away to give you free control of all the titles in which she shares."

Rogers' face reddened. "You make it sound bad." He went on suddenly. "I don't want it that way."

"Then why—"

"She's been making life hell for my sister. So what's got to be has got to be." He looked toward Lucille Rogers. "But I promise that anything from her shares while she is away will go for good doctors if they *think*—"

Farrell cut him off, but the damage had been done by his ineptness in letting cross-examination go out of control. Embarrassed, he sat down beside Lucille.

Weisman called Dr. Rincon. The psychiatrist, tall, lean, stoop-shouldered, bobbed his bald head as he sought the correct spot to peer through his trifocals as he stum-

bled up to the witness chair. He was evidently a veteran of courtroom appearances, for Weisman merely primed him and then let him present his testimony.

Dr. Rincon's clear positive voice went through a chronology of the case involving the patient. He finished by saying he was thoroughly convinced that Lucille Rogers was a progressive paranoiac and should be confined in a mental institution to protect herself and society until a cure should be effected, though he seriously doubted the possibility of that.

Smooth; yet Farrell knew he had to find a toehold somehow. He looked searchingly at Lucille Rogers. She sat rigid with tension, emotionally composed, and unhelpful. Farrell wondered how he was going to make the jury doubt anything they had heard.

"Doctor, you've painted a very dark picture, a very highly imaginative one, if I interpret your testimony correctly."

"Just where," Dr. Rincon inquired, "did your interpretation lead you astray from the facts?"

Farrell heard a chuckle from Weisman. This witness wasn't going to let himself be pushed around and his testimony impeached. Farrell tried desperately. Dr. Rincon admitted that many paranoiacs cleverly gave the ap-

pearance of mental stability until *the* trigger of aberration was touched. He reluctantly admitted that he and his staff had not been able to discover the trigger with Lucille Rogers.

"Perhaps because there isn't one," Farrell suggested.

The psychiatrist's pale blue eyes regarded him coldly. "I have had long experience, and taking all other factors into consideration—"

"You didn't find the trigger," Farrell insisted. "You merely surmised there was one, isn't that it?"

Dr. Rincon's lips were a thin line of determination. His words slashed back at Farrell when he persisted that petitions of insanity were often instigated for dubious reasons, as they probably were in this case. Dr. Rincon refused to back down.

"In the light of my examinations, mental and physical, plus the fact of violent struggle on the part of the patient when attendants, bringing her to the hospital—"

"Doctor," Farrell barked, "if attendants came into this courtroom and sought to haul you off to a mental institution as a patient, wouldn't you, or anyone on this jury, any sane, normal person in this room, put up a struggle to prevent it?"

"Very likely," Dr. Rincon admitted. "However, beneath my

agitation, I would also have the confidence that competent examination by qualified technicians would establish my sanity and expose the dubious purposes, if any, of the petition." He glanced toward and beyond the D.A.'s end of the table and raised his voice to forestall interruption by Farrell. "I and my staff *always* interview the signees of a petition of insanity. We found Mr. and Miss Rogers to be very rational in their claims and motives."

Farrell knew he'd smashed head-on against a stone wall of testimony. Court recessed for lunch. He turned to Lucille Rogers as the matron stood by. She twisted her gloves.

"Thanks for trying."

"The case isn't over yet," he muttered. *But it might as well be*, he thought bitterly. "Lucille . . . Mrs. Rogers . . . haven't you any friends who can vouch for you? Tell me who I can get to—"

"I never had a chance to make any lasting friends," she said softly. "I was orphaned very young, became a ward of the state, lived in foster homes I'd prefer to forget. The property left to me was held in trust until I came of age, and shortly after that I . . . I married Sam."

Farrell extended his hand tentatively toward her, then withdrew

it. "Please don't misunderstand me. I'm trying to help. How did your marriage come about?"

She faced Farrell squarely. "Frankly, looking back—" She shuddered slightly. "I think now it was his sister's idea that he should marry me—to get the property." Lucille closed her eyes in painful memory. "If I'd known then what I do now . . . At first, she was so friendly, so understanding when I would talk of how it was to be an orphan—" Lucille opened her eyes and shrugged hopelessly. "No, I can't help you, Mr. Farrell. I have no friends."

"You've got one," he murmured.

"Thank you. You're very generous, considering the circumstances." She moved away with the matron.

Farrell stared after her. His angry gaze swept the emptying courtroom, saw Margaret Rogers take Frank Rogers' arm, looking more like his mother than sister, smiling triumphantly. Farrell stared unseeingly at papers he hadn't had a chance to examine thoroughly, when Weisman approached.

"Nice try, Ben, but I guess you were right when I phoned you. It's pretty well stacked up. You can't beat Dr. Rincon. That guy knows his stuff."

"Nobody is infallible," Farrell

muttered in a tone of disgust.

Weisman stared at him. "Sorry I got you into this. You're too nice a guy to get yourself hurt, Ben, so don't be stubborn about it. What have you got left to fight with? Lucille Rogers? If you put her on the stand this afternoon—"

"You'll crucify her," Farrell charged.

"Just on the basis of the facts, the evidence presented." Weisman slapped Farrell's shoulder. "Don't take it so hard, Ben. You can't win them all. How about lunch? My treat."

Farrell looked straight at him. "You've already performed your act of charity by calling me in on this case, and no more is needed; for myself or my client."

"That's a low blow, Ben. I'll forget it."

He turned away abruptly. Farrell was tempted to call him back. This attitude would only make things tougher this afternoon. He let Weisman go, sat down and spread out the papers concerning the petition against Lucille Rogers, who had only one friend, himself.

When court reconvened he barely made it back in time from a pay phone. Had he wasted his money?

"Did you think of anyone?" he whispered.

"No, Mr. Farrell. Are you—going to put me on the stand?" Her

face was very pale, but eyes dry.

"Not if I can avoid it." She looked as though she'd lost a friend. "I believe in you," he said quickly. "Just take my word for it. We haven't got time to spare. Just answer my questions."

The voice of Judge McDaniel intruded.

"The people have rested, Mr. Farrell. We are waiting for the patient."

Farrell groaned inwardly. "I can't ask you now," he said to Lucille. "I might have an angle. Just listen to everything said. Don't make any sign or motion if you get the drift, only if it seems to be going off the track."

She nodded bewilderedly. Farrell got to his feet.

"Your honor, the patient has no witness to testify in her behalf." Weisman seemed to relax. There was a resigned murmur from beyond the rail. The jury sat stoically, probably with minds decided now. "If it please the court," Farrell went on doggedly, "I should like to have Miss Margaret Rogers recalled to the stand."

Weisman became unrelaxed. He was on his feet protesting, suspicious, suddenly sounding worried. Judge McDaniel gave his eyebrows a workout, and then permitted Margaret Rogers to take the stand. Her watery eyes had a defiant

gleam, her thin lips pressed together. Farrell forced an affable smile, and stood where he could watch her and Lucille Rogers without too much effort.

"Sorry to bother you, Miss Rogers—"

"You don't bother me, only she does."

Farrell ignored the interruption, but he knew the jury wouldn't. "I just want to make more positive some facts which were established this morning." He hesitated briefly. "I verified some of these facts during luncheon recess. I am simply taking this means of entering them in the record. When your mother gave birth to her twins, your brothers, she was in her forties, is that correct?" It was. "At that time," Farrell continued, "I believe she and her husband, your father, had been married for nearly twenty-five years. Is that a correct assumption?"

Margaret Rogers nodded, then said, "Yes," when the judge told her to speak up.

"Strange," Farrell remarked, "that there should be such a long gap between the births of their children. Or could it have been, Miss Rogers, that they believed they were not going to have any children, so in the early years of their marriage they adopted a child? You, for instance?"



He saw a flash in those defiant eyes and knew he had scored, deducting this from Lucille's remarks just before lunch, that Miss Rogers had been very understanding of how it was to be an orphan. Margaret Rogers didn't answer.

"Miss Rogers," Farrell prompted sharply, "you were an orphan and they did adopt you, didn't they?"

Weisman was on his feet. "Your honor—"

Farrell spoke louder. "Your honor, I intend to show how very relevant, important, and material this testimony is. I request that the witness be instructed to answer."

McDaniel wigwagged his eyebrows. "So instructed," he said to Margaret Rogers. She angrily admitted she had been adopted. Farrell appeared to consult some papers in his hand.

"You were an orphan, but you were not an only child."

"There was Sam and Frank," she announced.

"Foster brothers," he corrected. "By your own parents, and before adoption, you were not an only child." He paused. "Well, do you care to tell the court or shall I? How many brothers, sisters?"

"One."

"A brother?"

"Yes."

Farrell turned to the judge. "I also call attention to the fact that

this witness perjured herself by *not* correcting my statements and questions about the elder Mr. and Mrs. Rogers being referred to as her parents."

Margaret Rogers lashed out verbally. "An adopted child always comes to look on her foster parents as her own."

"Your witness," Farrell said to Weisman, who worriedly tried to repair any damage that might have been done to Margaret Rogers' testimony that morning.

Farrell next had Frank Rogers recalled to the stand. The man seemed stunned, staring at his sister. Farrell got his attention.

"Now that you have learned she is not your blood sister, think back, Mr. Rogers. Did you ever have reason to wonder that her mind might not be—"

Weisman was on his feet again. "Objection, the question calls for an opinion, not a statement of fact from the witness."

The eyebrows lifted and dropped. "Sustained."

Farrell rephrased his question several times, trying to make Frank Rogers relate some incident that would raise a doubt about Margaret Rogers' sanity.

"She was strict, got mad if me and Sam didn't obey," Rogers said. "She was a real mother to us, and as far as I'm concerned she's still

a real sister. What's wrong with that?"

Farrell gritted his teeth. The cross-examination had got away from him again. Lucille Rogers covertly got his attention. She obviously could tell some incidents if Farrell would let her take the stand. He couldn't chance it.

"Just one more question, Mr. Rogers. Your loyalty to Miss Rogers is admirable, so was your attitude toward Lucille Rogers this morning. Now, in regard to Lucille Rogers, will you please relate any incidents that *you witnessed* which would help this court, and jury, in determining her sanity."

Frank Rogers stared out toward his sister. "Well, there was that screaming at night—"

"Mr. Rogers, you only heard that. You were not present when it began, could not say for a fact that Lucille Rogers had pretended illness to summon your sister, and then began screaming?"

Frank Rogers looked down at his big knuckles. "I only assumed . . . No, I cannot say it for a fact," he mumbled.

"Thank you," said Farrell.

Weisman shot questions again to plug up possible loopholes that might have appeared. He was more confident, because it was obvious now that Farrell had only two choices: put Lucille Rogers on the

stand to be crucified, or recall Dr. Rincon and *try* to impeach that court veteran's testimony.

Farrell called for Dr. Rincon and caught a smug look from Weisman. Lucille Rogers looked hopeless again. Dr. Rincon successfully negotiated his trifocals and the steps to the witness box. He sat erect, ready for any challenge. Farrell hesitated, noting the hard light in those blue eyes, the grim line of the lips.

"Doctor, let us avoid technical terminology," he began.

"If it will help you to understand the facts that have already been presented, of course," the psychiatrist said with curt magnanimity which brought chuckles from the courtroom. The back of Farrell's neck felt uncomfortable.

"Doctor, this morning you testified that you always examine the signees of a petition. There were two signees to the petition under consideration here. Which of them did you interview first?"

"I don't see—"

"Which one, Doctor?" Farrell rustled papers in his hand.

"Miss Margaret Rogers."

"Which members of your staff were also present?" There was no immediate answer, so Farrell persisted, "The court could subpoena your office records, Doctor. But I think you can answer whether or

not you saw her alone. Did you? Yes or no?"

"Yes." Those blue eyes wavered slightly. "I saw her alone."

"Then, did you *thoroughly* interview Frank Rogers or merely have him corroborate what his sister had told you? If you prefer, I can have him recalled to answer that question."

Dr. Rincon looked as though he wanted to come out of the stand swinging. "I questioned him briefly," he snapped. "It was sufficient."

Farrell glanced at the judge, then very pointedly at Weisman as he said, "Let us *appear* to digress, become irrelevant and immaterial for the moment. Doctor, in your vast experience, have you encountered cases of mother love that, in lay terms, could be called excessively possessive, 'smother' love, wherein the female parent does not want her sons or daughters to marry, will do everything to prevent it?"

"There have been such cases," Dr. Rincon admitted carefully.

Farrell nodded. "And could not a similar possessiveness be assumed by a foster mother?" Farrell's voice rang out sharply. "By an older sister?"

The psychiatrist's eyes narrowed. Weisman started to get to his feet.

"I'm asking you for a statement of fact from your experience, Doctor."

Dr. Rincon stared at the floor beyond the witness box. "Yes," he murmured. "A sister, or someone else, could take on that . . . that possessive quality."

"A very domineering quality, one that will not stand for any interferences. Isn't that right, Doctor?"

"In some extreme cases, yes."

"Even to the point of murder, Doctor, to remove a person or persons who might be interfering with that complete possessiveness?"

Weisman was really on his feet now. Farrell let him object vociferously without opposition. Farrell looked at papers in his hand again. If he failed on the next question, the rest of the case would trickle through his fingers and Lucille Rogers would be confined in a mental institution.

"Doctor," he asked suddenly, "isn't it a fact that you were an orphan?"

Dr. Rincon had been expecting attack, but not from that quarter. His thin lips parted. His pale eyes expanded. "Uh—"

"Yes or no, Doctor?"

The psychiatrist looked down. "Yes," he muttered.

Farrell wanted to puff his cheeks with an exhalation of relief, but he had to keep hammering at a resemblance he'd noticed.

"An orphan, but not an only

child. You had a natural sister?"

"Your honor," Weisman began to protest.

The eyebrows bristled. "I see no grounds for objection. The relevancy of the questioning is becoming very obvious."

"Thank you, your honor," said Farrell. "Well, Doctor, you had a sister?"

"Yes."

"A very domineering, possessive sister?" Yes. "She is still alive?" Yes. "She is here in this courtroom?"

Dr. Rincon didn't answer. He just looked up briefly at Margaret Rogers who faced him with suppressed fury, a fury she couldn't keep suppressed. Suddenly she was on her feet, screaming at her real brother, Dr. Rincon. She screamed also at Farrell, who had interfered in her possessive life. The matron, who was supposed to keep an eye on Lucille Rogers, helped the bailiff to subdue Margaret Rogers.

Farrell did a quick wrap-up of his argument for the patient, Lucille Rogers. He pointed out that it would be up to the police to reopen the investigation of the fire that had caused the deaths of the first wives of the Rogers twins. He got Dr. Rincon to admit that, against his better judgment, he had allowed his domineering sister to force through the petition for

the confinement of Lucille Rogers. It was obvious that Sam Rogers had been allowed to marry Lucille only in order to obtain her property. He had really loved Lucille, and when he refused to let his "sister" turn his mind against Lucille, in fact he was trying to turn Frank against their older "sister's" lies about Lucille, then Margaret Rogers had obviously poisoned him as Lucille had suspected.

The petition against Lucille Rogers was dismissed. The judge had things to say and charges to make against Dr. Rincon concerning his testimony. McDaniel's eyebrows moved like tumbleweeds in an angry gale.

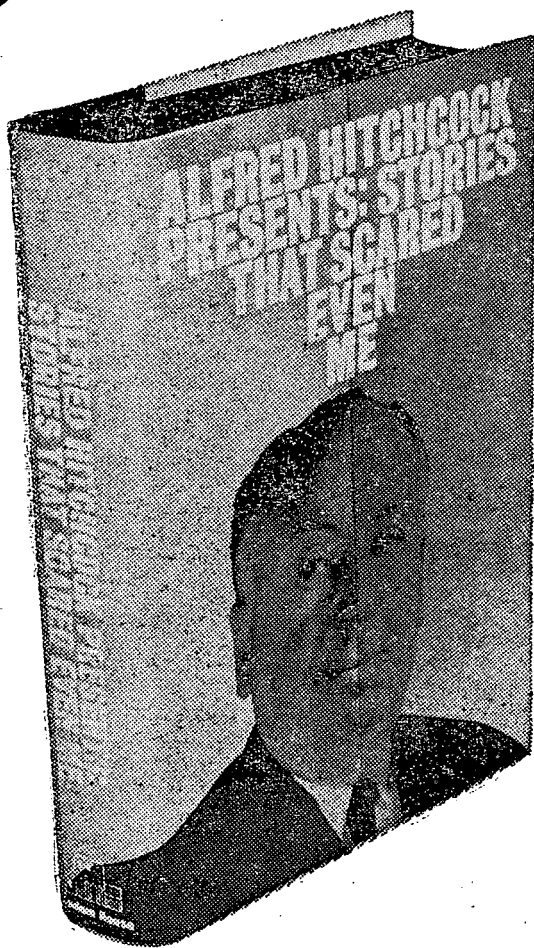
Weisman, looking badly shaken, extended his hand begrudgingly to Farrell, who still held blank papers he had "consulted."

Frank Rogers looked very pale. "You handed me a horrible shock, Mr. Farrell. But it's for the best. It would have been worse if I'd found out years later that I'd helped send an innocent woman to . . ." He winced, then gripped Farrell's hand and Farrell winced. "No hard feelings, Mr. Farrell," he said, then abruptly turned away.

Lucille Rogers, with tears in her eyes, looked as though she wanted to kiss Farrell. Then she did kiss him, and the case was closed.

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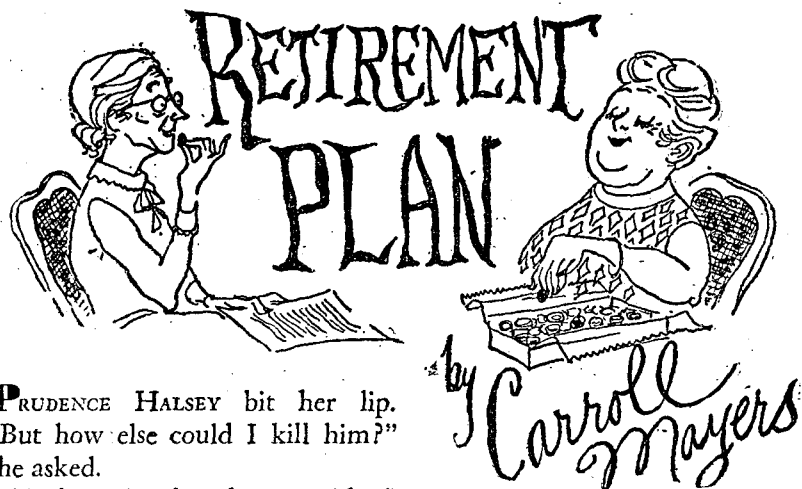
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*The intimacies of friendship, it seems, can be mysteriously rewarding.*



**P**RUDENCE HALSEY bit her lip. "But how else could I kill him?" she asked.

"I haven't the faintest idea." Sarah Tindall selected a chocolate cream from the box on the coffee table, regarded her friend with resigned indulgence. "Have you thought about poison?"

Prudence shook her head. "Poison won't do, Sarah," she said. "It's too . . . trite."

"Trite?"

"Yes. The books we have at the library say it's best to be fresh and original. Poison's been used so many times."

Sarah sighed. "It strikes me that a home movie camera with a con-

cealed gun is a little too original."

"But it could be."

The cream was delicious; Sarah took another bite. "I suppose so," she conceded. "I won't argue the point. You're the one who's writing the story."

Prudence looked hurt. "I only wanted your opinion. We've known each other so long . . ."

"Of course." Sarah's smile was soothing. "I'm pleased, really, that you should ask me." She finished the chocolate. "But I still don't un-

derstand why you're trying to write those trashy murder mysteries."

Prudence's grieved expression turned defensive. "They're not trashy, Sarah. At least, not all. Presidents and statesmen enjoy murder stories." Behind thick glasses, Prudence's weak eyes grew animated. "At the library, we get almost as many requests for the better ones as we do for those self-help books everybody's reading."

"Now, honestly—"

"It's true. Besides, you'd be surprised how studying mysteries stimulates your mind, helps you think things through."

Sarah's indulgent look returned. "And that's why you're trying to write them?"

"Not really." Prudence hesitated in choosing a chocolate of her own. "But they are so popular I thought if I could write one that would sell, perhaps I might make some extra money." Prudence looked at her friend without envy. "You certainly were fortunate," she said, "coming into that inheritance last month and being able to stop going out."

Sarah agreed simply. "Yes, I was."

"Uncle, wasn't it?"

"No. One of my aunts."

"Oh, yes." Prudence nibbled at her cream. "I only wish I could

stop working," she added reflectively. "Getting down to the library every day . . ."

Sarah nodded soberly. "It's hard, I know."

Prudence suddenly brightened. "I came here to talk about my story," she said, "not to belabor you with my troubles. Although now that you've given me your reaction . . ."

"Yes?"

"Perhaps I should try another plot, something entirely different."

"I should think so," Sarah said. "Why don't you write a love story?"

Prudence shook her head. "No, I still want to do a mystery. Only instead of a straight murder, perhaps I could work up a suspense story."

"Oh?"

"I could have a mysterious disappearance," Prudence said. "Something like Vera Mason's."

Selecting another piece of candy, Sarah hesitated as she gave Prudence an inquiring look. "Vera Mason?"

"That perky little waitress everybody suspected was involved with Judge Reynolds' son," Prudence said. "You remember—the girl who left town four or five weeks ago without a word or a trace."

"Oh . . . yes." Sarah decided against another chocolate. "You mean you'd write about her?"



"And Judge Reynolds," Prudence said. Then she added quickly, "Oh, I don't really mean *about* them; I think that would be what they call invasion of privacy."

Sarah frowned. "I don't believe I understand."

"I'd use different names, make up something that *could* have happened," Prudence explained. "As I said, Sarah, when you're interested in mysteries, you get so you can imagine all sorts of things."

"Oh?" Sarah said again.

"Yes," Prudence said. "Just suppose Judge Reynolds' son—he's back in college now for the fall term—but just suppose he'd gotten Vera . . . ah, in trouble. Campaigning for the Senate the way he is, the judge couldn't risk any family scandal. Suppose he had Vera visit him at his home on her free afternoon, to buy her off. And suppose," Prudence finished sprightly, "Vera wouldn't be bought cheaply and they had a terrific argument."

"That's quite a bit of supposing," Sarah ventured.

"I know," Prudence agreed. "But let's carry it one more step. Suppose in the heat of the argument the judge slapped Vera; knocked her down, say. If she chanced to strike her temple on something as she fell, the blow could kill her."

The candy box required center-

ing on the coffee table; Sarah attended the detail. "But that would be an unfortunate accident, not a murder mystery," she countered slowly.

Prudence shook her head. "Yes and no," she said. "Vera Mason was a loner; she'd come to town as a drifter, presumably left the same way. Say the judge realized that; say he decided to dispose secretly of Vera's body. He could wait until late that night, then load the body into his car, drive to some remote wooded spot and bury it."

Prudence's eyes danced. "That way, I'd have my mysterious disappearance. And I could go still another step. Suppose immediately after the 'accident'—with Vera dead on the floor—somebody walked in on the judge, surprised him. Then I'd have an extra complication, because the judge would have to pay that somebody to keep quiet, then keep on paying."

Sarah's gaze lifted from the coffee table. "Wouldn't that be too coincidental? Who'd be likely to walk in unexpectedly like that?"

Prudence said, "I could have a neighborhood delivery boy come in the back way." She smiled suddenly. "Or a part-time housekeeper with a key."

A tick was pulsing in Sarah's cheek. "That would still be pretty far-fetched, wouldn't it?"

Prudence disagreed. "Not entirely," she said earnestly. "Coincidences happen in real life too, you know. I imagine there's any number of people here in town who would be intrigued with the idea—"

Prudence broke off. "Are you all right, Sarah?"

Sarah cleared her throat. "I'm . . . fine. I just swallowed my breath." She was studying her friend intently.

"Oh. Well, I must be getting on." Prudence got to her feet. "Thanks so much for talking over my story; I'll let you know how I make out." She turned to leave, then swung back. "There is one more thing, Sarah," she said. "Down at the library, we're getting together a fund to purchase books in Braille for our blind citizens. I've been put in charge."

Sarah's tic was stronger now. "Blind? Here in Riverdale?"

"I know," Prudence said, "there are none now, but some day there may be. That's why we'd like the fund to be quite substantial." She brought her smile back. "Perhaps

you can't give too much yourself, but maybe you can persuade some wealthy man to make a generous donation. You must know someone who's already contributing to a worthy cause. I'll stop by again the end of the week."

Color began to suffuse Sarah's features, but Prudence didn't tarry any longer. At home, she hummed to herself as she fixed supper. Of course, she could have had a direct confrontation with 'the opposition,' even without damning specifics. Acting as she had, though, once an intuitive germ of suspicion had burgeoned, sparked by elements and events she'd known, meant more of a challenge; and every mystery-novel lover reveled in a good challenge, especially one which it now appeared had been successfully met.

Prudence's quiet smile was pure contentment. Mystery stories did sharpen your wits, let you think things through. Perhaps she *would* try one herself, now that she'd have more time and needn't be concerned with going to the library every day . . .

*Rising young entrepreneurs should note that few business transactions are without their special vexations.*



by  
**RICHARD  
DEMING**

*a Noveltie*

I STAYED out until eleven p.m., hoping the landlady would be in bed by then, but she had waited up, and her door opened just after I had sneaked past it.

"Mr. Willard!"

I flinched, then turned around to face her. She stood in her doorway, fat arms folded across her

ample bosom, her eyes blazing.

"Yes, Mrs. Emory?" I said meekly.

"It is the seventeenth!"

"Yes, ma'am, I know we promised the back rent today, but the fight we had scheduled was postponed—"

"Fight, schmicht," Mrs. Emory interrupted. "I don't think you're ever going to have another fight. You and Mr. Jones either pay up or get out. Tonight!"

"At this hour? Be reasonable, Mrs. Emory. I guarantee that by noon at the latest—"

I was interrupted again, this time by the front door opening with a bang. I recognized my roommate and manager by his lanky legs. That's all you could see of him because the upper part of his body, and even his head, was hidden by the huge pile of packages he was carrying.

I moved forward to relieve him of part of the load. In one of the paper bags I took from him, bottles clinked in an interesting manner.

Ambrose Jones peered around the remainder of the packages. "Ah, Mrs. Emory," he said with amiable formality, "you're looking particularly revolting tonight."

If the packages hadn't already given it away, his greeting would have told me that Ambrose had

fallen into money. He always insulted the landlady when he was flush. His formal tone also told me he was half stoned.

Mrs. Emory knew the symptoms too, and ignored the insult because she knew it meant our back rent was forthcoming. She used her pass key to open the door, and we both dumped our packages on the nearest twin bed. With a flourish Ambrose drew out a roll of bills.

"Here you are, my benevolent gargoyle," he said, counting out four twenties into the landlady's outstretched palm. "Two weeks back rent and two weeks rent in advance."

Mrs. Emory sniffed and left the room. Ambrose locked the door behind her and fanned the roll to show me that the twenties had been its lowest denomination. Most of the bills were fifties.

"How soon can we expect cops to be beating on the door?" I asked.

"Now, Sam," he said reproachfully, "this represents the advance on a business transaction. One thousand dollars, less what I spent for purchases and paid to Mrs. Emory. We have four thousand more coming at the conclusion of the deal."

The only thing I could think of was that he must have matched me with the champ and guaranteed

that I would take a dive. No, that couldn't be it. Why would the champ need a guarantee? I hadn't lasted a full round in two years and hadn't even had a fight in six months.

While I was going through these mental convolutions, Ambrose was opening packages. There were clothes for both of us. There were cold cuts, cheese, rye bread, pickles, caviar and smoked oysters. There was champagne, Scotch, bourbon and various mixes.

Ambrose stacked the comestibles on the dresser. While he sorted out the clothing, his and mine, I made myself a thick sandwich.

Then I asked, "Who do we have to kill?"

"A fellow named Everett Dobbs," he said brightly, and poured champagne into two water glasses.

I said, "Kidding aside, Ambrose, what's the deal?"

He raised his eyebrows at me, and popped a couple of smoked oysters into his mouth which he swallowed before saying, "I told you. Our client is a Mrs. Cornelia Dobbs, a handsome but fading nymph of middle age who has tired of her husband. I met her in a bar. After buying me several drinks she broached the subject of murder. She seemed to be under the impression I was a criminal

type because the place was Monty's."

That was understandable. Monty's is a waterfront bar where a large percentage of the clientele are criminal types.

"So you conned her out of a grand," I said.

"Conned her? I accepted an ethically binding advance. Are you accusing me of being dishonest?"

I found shot glasses in the top bureau drawer, opened a bottle of bourbon and poured. We had several more each, along with cold cuts, cheese, caviar, smoked oysters and pickles. As we reveled, Ambrose explained the arrangements he had made in more detail.

Everett Dobbs was a retired real estate speculator with about half the money in the county. He and his would-be widow lived in one of the huge homes in the Glen Ridge area. Dobbs spent most of his time at the Glen Ridge Country Club, however, and that's where Cornelia Dobbs wanted us to 'take' him.

According to Cornelia, her husband left the club promptly at eleven every night, almost invariably alone, and drove home. She had furnished Ambrose with a description of the man's car and its license number. We were to wait in the parking lot, waylay him, and drive him off in his own car.

One of us would drive Dobbs' car, the other would follow in the jalopy Ambrose and I jointly owned. We would arrange some kind of fatal accident. Cornelia, of course, would have arranged an unbreakable alibi.

I didn't doubt he was completely serious at this particular moment, and I was quite sure there actually was a Mrs. Cornelia Dobbs and that Ambrose had agreed to kill her husband for five thousand dollars, but Ambrose tended to lose his sense of perspective when he was drinking. I figured that when he groped through the red haze of next morning's hangover, he would be appalled at himself.

In fact I thought I might have a problem convincing him to keep the thousand-dollar advance. Cornelia could hardly demand it back without risking considerable trouble for herself, but my manager had a peculiar code of ethics. He was capable of arranging a fixed fight, but he always stood by his word.

I was still turning over in my mind arguments in favor of keeping the advance and telling Cornelia to get lost when Ambrose passed out.

Ambrose awoke with the hangover I had predicted. When he could open his eyes all the way without bleeding to death, he gave

me a weak smile and elbowed up.

"Smoked oysters don't mix very well with champagne, I guess."

"No," I agreed. "I'm sure it was the oysters."

He got up, wrapped a robe around his lanky frame and went up the hall to shower and shave. When he came back, I made the same trip.

Ambrose has remarkable powers of recuperation. He was dressed and clear-eyed by the time I got back. We had no conversation until I finished dressing.

Then I said, "You won't have to return the money. She couldn't possibly do anything about it."

"Return it? Why should I return it?"

"I mean she can't go to the police."

He frowned at me. "Why should she go to the police?"

"For fraud. When we don't kill her husband."

He examined me as though searching for the hole in my head.

I said patiently, "You're certainly not serious about becoming a professional killer."

"For five thousand dollars? Of course I am. I explained it all last night."

"You were drunk last night. We're not killers."

"We're not anything," he said. "You're not a fighter. You're an

ex-fighter, which makes me not anything either. I'm an ex-fight manager."

There must have been a lost look on my face, because he said in a more kindly tone, "This is our chance, Sam. With a stake we could find another fighter. I'll manage and you can train him."

"But murder, Ambrose!"

"Aw, come off it, Sam. You killed a man in the ring once."

"An accident," I said. "It's not the same. They put you in the gas chamber for murder."

"Only if they catch you. Do you know why most murderers get caught?"

"Sure. Because they're not as smart as cops."

"Most aren't," Ambrose agreed. "Statistically, eighty percent of the murders in this country are committed by friends or relatives of the victims. The cops have it easy with these cases. They simply check back on all the victim's associates, and eventually they have to come to the one who pulled the trigger or swung the axe or dropped the poison in the coffee."

"So eventually they'll get to us."

Ambrose gave his head a slow shake. "How? We've never even seen him and he's never seen us. There's no point of contact for the cops to check back on."

That made sense, but it takes a

while to adjust to the idea of murder. I said, "They always suspect the wife. Suppose she breaks down and fingers us?"

"She won't break down. She'll have a perfect alibi, and besides, it's going to look like an accident."

I fingered one of my cauliflower ears while I thought this over. Finally I said, "Suppose he doesn't come out of the club alone?"

"Then we wait until the next night and Cornelia rigs another alibi."

I had only one last question. "How do we collect the other four thousand?"

"She's to bring it to Monty's tomorrow night."

"I'm still not convinced," I said. "Let's go get some breakfast, and maybe you can convince me while we're eating."

He did.

We spent the day in plans and preparations. We drove out to Glen Ridge Country Club and looked over the parking lot. Then we drove over the route Everett Dobbs would take home and found a beautiful spot for an accident.

The road wound over Glen Ridge, a small mountain with a hairpin turn right at the crest, protected only by a wooden guard rail. Below the guard rail the mountainside sloped down at a sixty-degree angle to another sec-

tion of the winding road nearly fifty feet below.

"They'll think he cracked up on the way home," Ambrose said. "Cornelia says he drinks a lot, so it'll just look like another drunk who missed a curve."

We got out to the country club at nine that night, just in case Everett Dobbs left early. Ambrose parked the jalopy and we got out to look for Dobbs' car. Cornelia had described it to Ambrose and had given him its license number, so we had no difficulty finding it even though it was quite dark by then and there were some fifty other cars on the lot.

As soon as we located it, Ambrose drove the jalopy into a vacant slot right behind it, and we settled back to wait.

Ambrose had brought along a fifth of Scotch for himself and a quart of bourbon for me in order to relieve the tedium. We also needed it to quiet our nerves.

"Maybe we'd better slow down on the hooch," I suggested.

Ambrose frowned at me in the darkness and took another swig of Scotch. "I'm as sober as a sphinx," he said.

At ten p.m. a lone figure came from the direction of the clubhouse and weaved in our direction. He was a tall, lean man in a dark suit, and his gait indicated he

was cock-eyed, out of his skull.

"If that's Dobbs, he's an hour early," Ambrose said.

"From the looks of him, the barkeep probably cut him off. He wouldn't have lasted until eleven."

The man put a key into the door lock of the car we were watching.

"Guess this is it," I said. "I can handle this joker alone. You just follow."

I got out of the car and was surprised when I staggered slightly. Straightening, I went over to where the tall man was still fumbling with the lock.

"Having trouble?" I asked.

"The keyhole keeps moving, old man," he said. "Would you mind seeing if you can hit it?"

He handed me the keys. The keyhole *was* moving, I noticed, but I managed to slip the key into it on the second try.

"Bravo!" the tall man said when I pulled the door open. "May I buy you a drink for your trouble?"

I decided getting him to go along willingly would be simpler than slugging him. "Sure," I said, "but not here. I know a better place."

"Fine," he said with enthusiasm. "Any place good enough for my friends is good enough for me." He thrust out his hand. "My name is Dobbs, old buddy."

I shook the hand. "Willard," I



said. "Sam Willard, pal o' mine."

"Delighted, old man. And now the keys, please."

"Maybe I'd better drive," I said. "I know where this place is, and you don't."

"Be my guest," he said, offering a little bow and losing his balance.

Preventing him from falling on his face by catching him, I helped him into the car, then slid behind the wheel.

The engine purred beautifully. As I pulled off the lot, the jalopy chugged along behind us. Dobbs promptly went to sleep. We reached the hairpin turn at the top of Glen Ridge without incident. It was just beyond the crest, so that there was a slight downgrade to it. I parked on the very crest and Ambrose parked behind me. There wasn't another car in sight.

Dobbs was still sleeping, and I was afraid he would wake up if I pulled him over under the wheel. I figured nobody would be able to tell he hadn't been behind the wheel anyway, after a drop of fifty feet.

Ambrose came up, weaving slightly, as I climbed from the car. Leaving the door open, I shifted into drive, released the emergency brake and reached in to press the accelerator with my hand. I pressed it gently, just enough to start the car rolling. Then I shifted

into neutral, pulled out my head and slammed the door.

It was about forty feet to the guard rail. The car picked up speed nicely and crashed through the wooden barrier as though it were cardboard. The sound of vegetation being torn out by the roots ended in a tremendous crash from below.

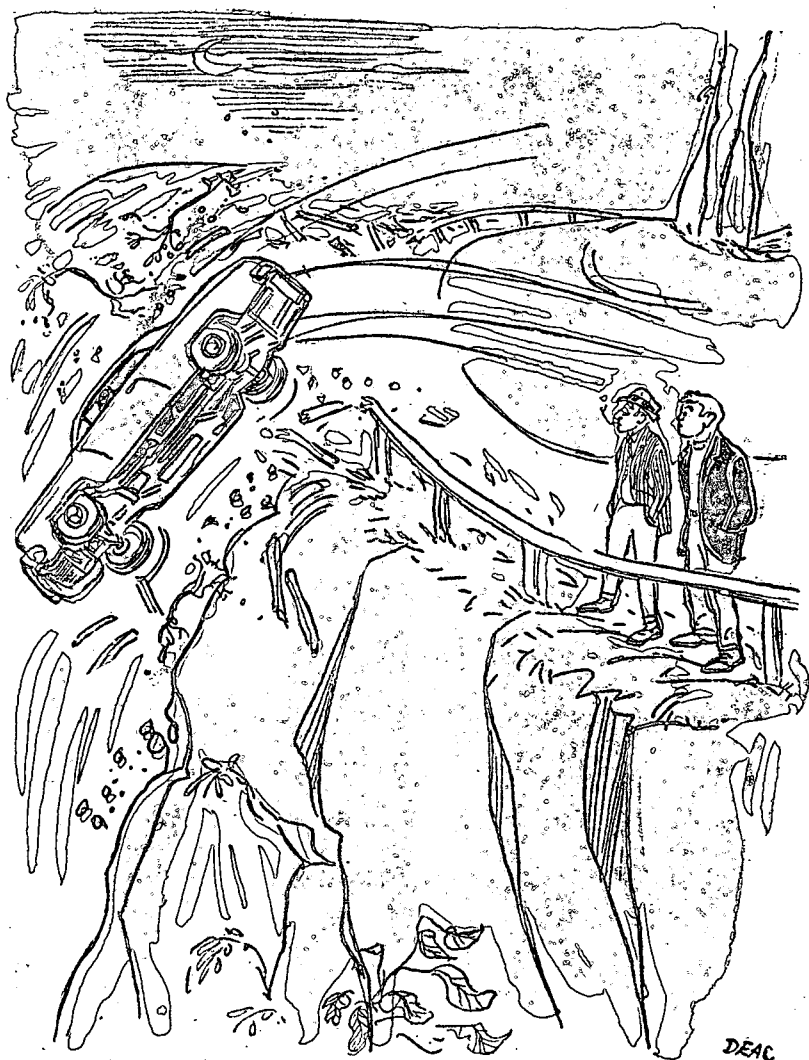
We raced back to the jalopy, Ambrose backed and turned, and we headed back the way we had come.

"Maybe we should have kept going the other way," he said worriedly as we reached the next turn. "We have to drive right past where it landed, and maybe it's blocked the road."

"It probably just bounced and kept going," I said. "There's another small drop on the other side."

We rounded another curve, and now were right below the hairpin turn. A fender, a wheel and a lot of broken glass littered the road. Presumably the rest of the car had continued on across the road, over the next bank and down into the underbrush below us. We couldn't see down there because it was too dark.

Ambrose slowed to five miles an hour in order to edge past the debris. A tall figure slid on the seat of his pants from the undergrowth



sloping upward to our right. Ambrose braked to a dead halt.

The man picked himself up, brushed off his pants and staggered over to the window on my side of

the car. His clothing was pretty well torn up, but otherwise he seemed unharmed.

Leaning his head into the car, he said, "I say, gentlemen, I seem

to have had a bit of an accident. Must have gone to sleep."

He was looking straight at me with no sign of recognition. Apparently he was one of those drunks who blank out, because he obviously had no recollection of our previous encounter.

"I'm not exactly sure where I am," he said in a tone of apology. "Do you happen to know?"

"Glen Ridge," I said.

"Oh, yes." He glanced around vaguely. "I recognize it now. I say, do you suppose that's part of my car?" He was looking at the smashed green fender.

"Uh-huh," I said. "No point in looking for the rest. I doubt that it will run." I got out of the car. "Get in."

"Why that's very nice of you gentlemen," he said, climbing into the middle. "May I buy you gentlemen a drink?"

"We have one," I said, handing him the bourbon bottle.

He took a grateful swig as Ambrose started the car. When he handed the bottle back, I took a swig too. Ambrose lifted his Scotch bottle from the floor and had a drink.

"What now?" I asked Ambrose.

"I'm thinking," he said.

"I think I must have been heading for the country club," Dobbs said, "but I can't go in these

clothes. Would you gentlemen mind dropping me at my boat?"

"What boat?" Ambrose asked.

"I keep it at the Lakeshore Yacht Club." Suddenly his face brightened with inspiration. "Do you gentlemen enjoy night fishing?"

Even as dark as it was I could see the interest in Ambrose's face.

"What kind of boat do you have?"

"Just a small one. A twenty-five footer."

Ambrose and I exchanged glances, both thinking the same thing.

"You mean you'd like to go fishing tonight?" Ambrose asked.

"If you gentlemen have the time to be my guests."

"We'll take the time," Ambrose said.

The pier of the Lakeshore Yacht Club was well lighted, and we could see about fifty boats, ranging from skiffs with outboard motors to cabin cruisers, docked in individual slips. None of the other owners seemed to share Dobbs' enthusiasm for night fishing, because there wasn't a single car in the parking area facing the pier.

Our host directed us to park in front of slip number twelve. The boat was a graceful little cabin cruiser with an enclosed bridge. A registration number and the name *Bountiful* was painted on the bow.

Ambrose carried the Scotch bottle as we clambered aboard. Dobbs and I had finished the bourbon en route. By now he was so snockered, we had to help him aboard.

Dobbs showed us below by opening the hatch and falling down the ladder. I was the next down, but I held onto an iron handrail and made it erect. I lit my lighter, spotted a wall switch and flicked on an overhead light. By the time Ambrose had joined us, I had helped Dobbs to his feet.

"Thanks, old man," he said. "I'll have to get those steps fixed."

There were four bunks and a couple of cupboards in the cabin. Dobbs opened one of the cupboards and took out a couple of fishing rods. "Bait's topside," he said, dropping the rods and staggering to hands and knees.

I helped him to his feet again as Ambrose collected the rods. Ambrose carried them tops while I assisted Dobbs up the ladder. Dobbs collapsed in a canvas chair on the stern deck and immediately went to sleep.

"You know how to run this thing?" Ambrose asked.

"I've handled boats," I said. "Not on fresh water, but it shouldn't be any different than salt water. I'll take a look."

I climbed up to the wheelhouse

and, with the aid of my lighter, found the control panel lights. It took my eyes a time to focus, but eventually I figured out the purpose of the various controls. I started the engine, let it idle and switched on the running lights.

Ambrose climbed up into the wheelhouse. "You familiar with the harbor?" he asked.

"I told you I'd never been out on the lake before."

"No, you didn't. You just said you'd never handled a boat on fresh water."

"All right," I said. "No, I'm not familiar with the harbor, but the channel will be marked with buoys."

Ambrose peered aft. "That looks like a seawall out there. Don't run into it."

I looked that way and dimly saw a long concrete breakwater across the mouth of the harbor. A pair of blinking red lights about fifty feet apart bobbed in the water at the near end of it.

"I know how to navigate," I growled. "Go cast off."

He started down the ladder frontward, then changed his mind and backed down, holding onto the iron handrail with his free hand.

After some fumbling with the line he finally cast off. A moment later I backed from the slip, swung

the boat around and headed at low speed for the lighted buoys marking the harbor entrance.

"Go out a couple of miles," Ambrose said.

My navigation must have been a little rusty, because I scraped one of the lighted buoys as we went by. I missed the other by a good fifty feet, however.

Then we were beyond the seawall, in open water. There was only a slight roll, but it brought a groan from Ambrose. I opened the throttle and headed straight out from shore.

Ambrose had said to go out a couple of miles, but I couldn't seem to focus my eyes on the compass, and I was afraid if I got too far out to see the harbor lights, I might get turned around. About a half mile out I shifted into neutral, let the boat drift and went down on deck. I figured nobody as drunk as Dobbs would be able to swim a half mile.

Dobbs was still asleep. Ambrose was hanging onto the stern rail and breathing deeply. His face was pale.

"Feel better?" I asked.

"I'm all right. How far out are we?"

"Far enough," I said, and lifted Dobbs from his chair. He nestled his head against my shoulder like a baby.

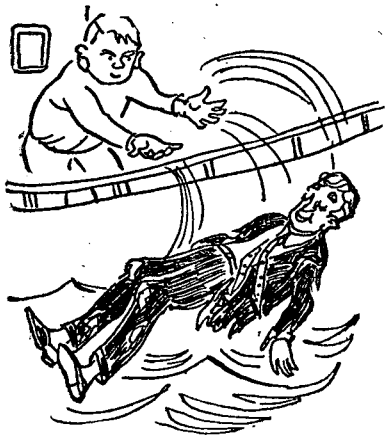
I heaved him over the stern. There was a splash, a sound of floundering, then a sputtering noise.

"Man overboard!" came a strangled shout from the darkness.

The shout came from several yards away, because the boat was drifting rapidly. I went tops, engaged the clutch and swung back toward the harbor. Ambrose came up to stand beside me.

As we neared the blinking red lights of the buoys, I thought of something. I said, "Aren't the cops going to wonder how Dobbs got so far out if we leave his boat docked?"

Ambrose patted my shoulder. "Luckily you have a manager to do your thinking for you, my sinewed but brainless friend. After we land, we'll aim the boat back out to open water. Eventually it'll



run out of gas and be found drifting. When Dobbs' body is washed up and the autopsy shows he was full of alcohol, it'll be obvious he fell overboard in a drunken stupor."

I wasn't so brainless that I couldn't see a big hole in this plan. We were almost to the marked channel now. I cut the throttle way down, swung in a circle and began to back toward the end of the seawall.

"What are you doing?" Ambrose asked.

"You can't aim a pilotless boat like you do a gun," I said. "There isn't a chance in a thousand I could hit the channel if I started it out from shore. It'd crash right into the *inner* side of the seawall and give the cops something to wonder about. So we'll land on the seawall, aim it outward from here, then walk along the wall to shore."

I was making sternway at too sharp an angle. I shifted to ahead, pulled forward several yards and tried again. I had to maneuver several times before I got it just right, but I finally managed to slide the boat gently against the end of the cement wall with its bow pointed outward.

About a dozen seagulls roosting on the wall flapped away when the hull scraped the cement.

Ambrose jumped onto the wall

and held the boat there by the rail. I could hear the cement grinding a little paint off, but it wasn't doing any serious damage.

I set the rudder so the boat would go straight out from shore, spiked the wheel, engaged the clutch, and gave it just enough gas for headway. Then I scrambled down the ladder. Ambrose had been unable to hold the boat against the thrust of the propeller, and there was already a three-foot gap of water between me and the wall when I mounted the rail.

I made a mighty leap, landed on the wall and crashed into Ambrose, knocked him down. Another flock of seagulls a little farther on flapped into the air.

Ambrose climbed to his feet, examined his hands, then tried to peer around at the seat of his pants. He took out a handkerchief and wiped his hands.

"This wall's just been painted," he said.

"That's not paint," I told him. "It's seagull manure."

A revolted expression formed on his face. He wiped at the seat of his pants with the handkerchief, then tossed it into the water. I led the way along the seawall to where the harbor shore curved around to meet its far end. Roosting seagulls rose at our approach and settled again on other parts of the wall. As

we neared the wall's end, I spotted a pair of blinking red lights and came to an abrupt halt.

"What's the matter?" Ambrose asked.

"I hope not what I think. We'll know in a minute."

We went on and discovered that what I had hoped against was true. The blinking red lights I had seen were on buoys marking another channel. There was seventy-five feet of water between us and shore.

Ambrose said bitterly, "I should never let you think."

"So we'll get wet. We'll just have to swim for it."

"I can't swim," Ambrose announced.

After some unfriendly discussion, we finally solved that problem. Ambrose held onto my belt while I breaststroked across the seventy-five-foot channel. We climbed out on what seemed to be the public dock. A few fishing tugs were tied up to it, but nobody was around.

"At least I got my pants clean," Ambrose said, craning around in an attempt to see his seat.

It was about three-quarters of a mile along the curving shore back to where our jalopy was parked. We sloshed along without conversation. Although it was a fairly warm night, we were chilly in our

wet clothes. Occasionally I could hear Ambrose's teeth chattering.

As we reached the Yacht Club pier, I spotted the running lights of a boat just entering the harbor by means of the channel we had used. The lights moved in our direction.

We both halted in front of slip twelve and watched the *Bountiful* slide smoothly into its slot. The running lights went out and a tall, lean figure descended to the deck and tied up. Then he saw us standing there.

"Hello, fellows," Dobbs said cordially, examining our wet clothes with interest. "You get a ducking too?"

"Uh-huh," Ambrose said morosely.

"Lose your boat?"

He had blanked out again. He didn't even remember us.

I said, "Yeah."

"Too bad," Dobbs said with sympathy. "I was luckier." He indicated his own sopping clothing. "I'm not sure just what happened, because I was drinking a little. First I knew, I was in the water and separated from the boat. You can bet that sobered me up. I swam around for a devil of a long time before it swung back right by me at a speed slow enough for me to climb aboard."

"You're a lucky guy," Ambrose

said sourly, his mouth drooping.

In an apologetic tone Dobbs said, "I'd offer you a change of clothes, but I only have one on board. You live far from here?"

"Clear downtown," Ambrose said.

"Well, if you wait until I change, I have a place near here where you can dry out. It's not my home, but it has a dryer in it, and something to drink."

We decided to wait.

Dobbs disappeared below. Ten minutes later he reappeared wearing sneakers, white ducks and a turtleneck sweater. When he stepped onto the pier he staggered slightly, but instantly righted himself. I realized that while his cold bath had sobered him considerably, he was still about half stoned.

He glanced around the parking area and looked puzzled when he saw no car but ours.

"How the devil did I get here?" he asked. "I just remembered my car's in the repair shop."

He must have a vague recollection of the accident, I thought. Neither of us told him his car wasn't in a garage, but was spread over a considerable area at Glen Ridge.

"Must have taken a taxi," he decided. He thrust out his hand to me. "My name's Dobbs."

"Willard," I said.

When he offered his hand to Ambrose, Ambrose said, "Jones."

"Delighted," Dobbs said. "How'd you lose your boat?"

"Capsized," Ambrose said briefly. "It was only a skiff and we were inside the seawall."

We let Dobbs sit in the back of the jalopy so that we wouldn't get him wet. He directed Ambrose to drive three blocks south to Main Street, then two blocks west.

"Pull in that driveway," he said, pointing.

The entrance to the drive was between stone pillars. On one of the pillars was a sign: *Dobbs Funeral Home*. Dobbs had Ambrose park by a side entrance and we all got out.

As our host fiddled with a key, I whispered to Ambrose, "I thought this guy was in real estate."

"Retired," Ambrose whispered back. "Guess he's gone into another business."

Dobbs got the door open and led us into a small foyer. An open door off the left side revealed a business office. Dobbs opened a door to the right, flicked on a light switch and led us down a flight of stairs to the basement.

We passed through a room full of empty caskets into another room where there was a sink, a couple of metal tables on wheels and a counter along one wall containing



implements of various kinds. I guessed this was the embalming room.

From a cupboard Dobbs took two folded white cloths which looked like small sheets, except that the material was heavier. He handed one to me and one to Ambrose.

"Sorry I haven't robes to loan you while your clothing dries," he said, "but you can wrap yourselves in these."

We emptied our pockets on one of the embalming tables, stripped off our clothes and wrapped the sheet-like cloths around us like togas. Dobbs carried our clothing, including our shoes, into what seemed to be a service hall off the embalming room. A moment later we heard a laundry dryer start to rotate.

When Dobbs came back, Ambrose asked, "What are these things we're wearing?"

"Shrouds," Dobbs said.

I didn't exactly shudder, but I hoped he had set the dryer on high.

Dobbs went over to a cabinet, took out three water glasses and a bottle of Scotch. I noted that there were several other bottles in the cabinet. He set the glasses on one of the embalming tables, poured a stiff jolt into each glass and held onto the bottle.

"Let's go in here where it's more comfortable," he said, and led us into a comfortable little den. Dobbs set the bottle on a desk and took an easy chair, Ambrose took another and I sat on the sofa.

"Cheers," Dobbs said, raising his glass.

We raised ours in salute. Dobbs tossed off his whole drink. Ambrose and I each took only about half of ours.

It went that way for the next half hour. For every ounce of Scotch Ambrose and I drank, Dobbs put away two. At the end of the half hour the bottle was empty. Dobbs tried to get out of his chair and found that he couldn't.

"I say, old man," he said to Ambrose, "would you mind getting us a fresh bottle?"

The swim had considerably sobered me, but I was beginning to feel a little fuzzy again. Ambrose seemed perfectly sober, though, when he rose, clutched his toga around him and went into the embalming room. I noticed he carried the empty Scotch bottle with him.

"How long does that dryer take?" I asked Dobbs.

"Dryer?"

"You put our clothes in the dryer, remember?" I said. "How long does it take?"

"Oh, your clothes. Yes, of course.

They're out in the dryer, old man."

"How long does it take?" I asked patiently.

"The dryer? About forty-five minutes. Wasn't there another gentleman with us a moment ago?"

"He went after more Scotch," I informed him.

"He did? That was unnecessary. There's plenty in the embalming room." He attempted to focus his eyes on a wristwatch, gave up and asked, "What time is it, old friend?"

My watch said eleven-thirty, which surprised me. Then I realized it was stopped. It wasn't waterproof.

"I don't know," I said. "I'd guess about twelve-thirty."

Ambrose came back carrying two bottles. He handed one to Dobbs, poured drinks for me and himself from the other. Dobbs poured his tumbler nearly full. We all drank, Dobbs, as usual, pouring it all down in one gulp. He looked surprised.

"Was that Scotch?" he asked in a squeaky voice.

He picked up his private bottle and looked at the label. His eyes wouldn't focus on it, so I went over and looked at it.

"Scotch," I verified.

Dobbs gave a relieved nod and poured himself another glassful. I went back to the sofa, sat down

and looked at Ambrose. He was looking at Dobbs.

Ambrose raised his glass and said, "Cheers."

Dobbs drained his glass and looked surprised again. "Odd," he said, staring at the glass.

Ambrose got up, wrapped his toga about him and went over to pour the man a third drink. Dobbs merely continued to stare down at it thoughtfully.

We sat there in silence for about ten minutes. Ambrose and I finished our drinks and Ambrose poured two more. Dobbs hadn't sampled his third one.

"Cheers," Ambrose said, raising his glass.

Dobbs raised his very slowly. It took him a couple of minutes to let it trickle down his throat, but he managed to put it all away. His arm came down with equal slowness, resting the glass on the arm of his chair.

Ambrose asked, "How long does that dryer take?"

Our host didn't answer. I said, "Forty-five minutes."

"Then our clothes should be done," Ambrose said.

The dryer had stopped. Our clothes were bone dry, but our suits were wrinkled and the shoes were stiff.

When we had dressed, Ambrose carefully refolded the shrouds and

replaced them in the cupboard. We picked our pocket items from the embalming table and stowed them away.

"What about him?" I asked, jerking my thumb toward the den.

"He should be done too."

A trifle unsteadily he walked into the den. I trailed along. Dobbs sat in his chair with a fixed smile on his face. Ambrose went over and shook him. There was no response.

Ambrose tried to lift the glass from his hand, but couldn't. He tried to pry the man's fingers loose, but they were gripping the glass too tightly.

"What's the matter with him?" I asked.

"He drank about a fifth of embalming fluid."

I gave the man in the chair a startled look. "You mean he's finally dead?"

"Cold as a carp. We'd better get him out of here."

"Why?" I asked.

Ambrose thought this over, weaving slightly. Presently he said, "I think we'd better collect on this tonight and then blow town, instead of waiting until tomorrow night. And what better proof of accomplishment can we show than this corpse?"

It was my turn to think matters over. Somehow his suggestion

didn't strike me as very wise. If we left Dobbs where he was, it seemed to me the cops would assume he got too stoned to know the difference between Scotch and embalming fluid, which was more or less what had actually happened. Driving around with a corpse in the car seemed asking for trouble, but as Ambrose had pointed out, what better proof could there be than the corpse?

Ambrose said, "Take that glass out of his hand."

I tried, but I couldn't bend his fingers.

"The hell with it," Ambrose said. "Just carry him out to the car."

He was stiff as a frozen steak. When I heaved him into my arms, he remained in his seated position, his right arm thrust out in front of him and the glass still clutched in his hand.

Ambrose picked up the Scotch bottle we had partly emptied, plus the one containing the embalming fluid. He switched off the den light and carried the two bottles into the embalming room.

He set down the Scotch bottle and dumped the embalming fluid in the other one down the sink. I stood with the rigid body of Dobbs in my arms as he rinsed out the bottle and dropped it into a waste can. Then he picked up

the Scotch bottle and preceded me into the casket room, switching off the embalming room light as he went through the door.

At the top of the stairs he flicked the light switch to turn off the light in the casket room. When I had carried Dobbs into the foyer, he closed the door behind me. The foyer light had been on when we entered, so we left it that way. Ambrose set the spring lock on the side door before pulling it closed behind us.

I set Dobbs in the rear of the jalopy, where he sat erect, smiling frozenly and thrusting his glass out before him. I climbed in front and Ambrose backed out of the driveway.

It was a long drive to the home of Everett and Cornelia Dobbs. When we passed the place where the car had crashed, someone had pulled the wheel and fender off onto the shoulder, but the road was still littered with glass.

It must have been two a.m. when we finally arrived. A curving drive led past a swimming pool which had underwater lights. Since no one was in the pool, I assumed the lights were left on all night as a safety precaution so no one would fall into it in the dark.

The house was a two-story brick. Ambrose parked right in front of the porch and we both went up

to the door. Through a window we could see a night light on in the front room. Ambrose rang the bell.

"Suppose she's not alone?" I said.

"She will be. She outlined her plans to me in detail. She was having some women in for bridge to establish her alibi. She estimated they would leave about midnight, and she was going to ask the woman who had driven the others here to call her when she got home so she'd know everybody got home safely. That would cover her until about twelve-thirty, then she planned to go to bed until the police awakened her to report the accident."

Several minutes passed and Ambrose had rung the bell again before it finally opened. A bleached blonde of about thirty-five in a housecoat peered out.

"Ah, Mrs. Dobbs," Ambrose said with a formal bow which nearly threw him off balance before he managed to right himself. "This is my partner, Sam Willard."

She barely glanced at me. "What in heaven's name are you doing here?"

"Reporting mission accomplished. We have the evidence in the car."

She came out on the porch and looked from me to Ambrose. "That's impossible."

"Look in the back of our car," Ambrose said, making a grand gesture in that direction.

"What are you talking about?" she asked crossly. "Everett phoned me from the club. He loaned his car to Herman and stayed there all night."

She went down the steps and peered into the back seat. Her eyes grew saucer size.

"Herman!" she said. "What's the matter with him?"

We had followed her down the steps. Ambrose said, "Herman?"

She swung on him. "That's Everett's younger brother, you fool! The man I intend to marry. What have you done to him?"

One thing about Ambrose: even snookered to the eyebrows he could always think on his feet. He said soothingly, "He's merely drunk, madam. We'll see that he gets home safely. Sorry we erred. He was getting into your husband's car and he said his name was Dobbs, so naturally we assumed he was your husband."

"Why did you bring him here anyway?" she snapped.

Ambrose was still thinking on his feet. He said, "We meant to undress him, put on his swim trunks and drown him in the pool."

"Shut up!" she hissed. "Herman doesn't know anything about my

plans! Or at least he didn't."

"He can't hear you," Ambrose assured her. "He's passed out."

He gave her another formal bow, rounded the car and slid under the wheel. I scrambled in next to him. Ambrose backed the car, turned and drove back down the driveway. Gazing back, I saw Cornelia Dobbs still glaring after us.

Ambrose pulled over to the curb as soon as we hit the street, cut the engine and lights.

"What now, genius?" I asked.

"We wait until her lights go out again."

All but the night light went out a few minutes later.

"Okay," Ambrose said. "Lift him out."

I got out, reached in back and lifted the stiff body into my arms. Ambrose led the way up the driveway and over to the swimming pool. There were a couple of canvas lawn chairs next to it. Ambrose had me set Herman Dobbs in one.

He had brought along the Scotch bottle. He stood contemplating Herman Dobbs' frozen smile for a moment, then poured the outstretched glass half full.

"Cheers," he said gloomily. "Now let's get the hell out of here, pack our stuff and head south."

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